涼宮ハルヒの驚愕（後）

すずみやはるひのきょうがく・ご

谷川流（たにかわ・ながる）
いとうのいち（イラスト）

角川スニーカー文庫

The Surprise of Haruhi Suzumiya

Part Two

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Chapter 7

α-10

Thursday was the next day.

The time from morning to evening, usually allocated for routine lectures, crept along painfully slow for the entire day. Thankfully, at the chime signalling the end of homeroom Haruhi and I were finally free.

Seems like the one-on-one lecture with Haruhi was to last only until yesterday. The lecture accompanied by the view of the students – who were assigned to cleaning duties – of an indescribable phenomenon had also stopped. Thus, we rushed out of the classroom in that manner. And just to clarify, I was just forcefully dragged out of the classroom by Haruhi, though I was happy that I no longer needed to attend any after-class lectures by Haruhi-sensei.

Just like how we had always used the same route to get to the Literature Club classroom, the atmosphere of spring in the school was becoming second-nature to me as well. It was mid-April so we had grown used to spring being constantly around us. It was as one expected from a four-season climate: seasons appear faithfully every year without being asked and continue to control every living being on earth since the beginning of time. Wait, isn't that just showing off?

However one could not go against the flow of time which continued to push us along. Changes which could not be ignored even began knocking on the door of the SOS Brigade, which had been faced with an aggressive force since last spring.

If one were to bring such a phenomenon to the courtroom, it could be presented as evidence without any problem. As such, a person exemplifying that was waiting for us.

The moment we opened the door, someone promptly stood up from the pipe chair. "I've been waiting, Senpais!" The one calling out like a young swallow towards its parents returning to their nest was the boisterous female freshman. She was the only one to have cleared the unreasonably difficult entrance trials set by Haruhi Suzumiya for joining the Brigade. With her hair jutting out in all directions as if she just had a failed hair perm and decorated with a smiley-face hairpin on her head was this girl waiting for us with shining, expectant eyes like Christmas lights.

"From today on I am officially a member of the SOS Brigade! It's very nice to meet you all! "She gave a deep bow.

Yasumi Watahashi. Despite her occasional lisp, she had a voice whose volume would make one think she should consider joining the choir. Her countenance shone brilliantly like Venus during daybreak. Her vigor could rival that of Haruhi. It could be said that she looked like she possessed the energy that would let her run for a very long time.

"Ah, please make yourself at home, all right?" I replied with a sigh.

As if not bothered about my response, she lifted her head swiftly and replied "Okay! I've been doing that already! It's very all right indeed!" Due to the charged particle cannon-like energy in her open and frank gaze, if I continued to look at her face that was overflowing with vitality my eye lens would fill to overcapacity and explode. Because of that, I casually averted my eyes and started looking for something to do in the room.

As usual everyone was assembled there. Asahina-san, already in her maid dress, was boiling water in a kettle. Koizumi was sitting in front of a bizarre board, which was neither that for playing Shogi or Go, and moving one of the circular pieces. At her usual seat was Nagato, who was reading a hardcover book and ignoring everything else in the universe.

Finally, seeming satisfied with no reason, Haruhi sat heavily at her brigade chief's seat and stated, "Well then."

Full of pompous grandeur like the meeting at Canossa Castle between Henry IV of the Holy Roman Empire and Pope Gregory VII, she continued with a smug smile. "Everyone should know who she is already but let me introduce this person again. This girl is our new member, selected from rigid and fair tests, Yasumi Watahashi-chan. Everyone remember all our achievements and lessons for the past year as the SOS Brigade and cram it into her brain! Do it strictly, but gently like you are giving candy flavored floss to a kid. Drill her so hard that she can become the foundation stone of the next generation of the SOS Brigade!"

"D-drill her…?" Casting her eyes on Yasumi, Asahina-san surveyed the domain of her jurisdiction, the tea sets, and had the look of Sen Rikyu[1] pondering on how good it would be if a countryside commander taught him the true meaning of the hot water used to boil tea. Since this was not the Tea Ceremony Society, such a refined technique of making coarse tea and fine tea was not exactly necessary. Regardless, the tea made by Asahina-san's hands was sweet like honeydew compared to the dilute and watery stuff made by Haruhi. Thus, in order to pass down the fine techniques of the Art of Asahina-style Tea to the next generation, she should teach it to the new member of our brigade. Incidentally, Haruhi did not teach anyone her techniques at all. That's because her tea was just hot water with no identifiable color or taste.

"Okay! I'll go make and serve tea now! Asahina-senpai, would you please instruct me on the art of making tea? Pretty please? I'd greatly appreciate your lessons." Seemingly acknowledging Asahina-san as her master on the spot, Yasumi managed to enter straight into Asahina-san's territory.

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[1] Sen Rikyu was considered the most influential person on Japanese tea ceremony, particularly in the tradition of wabi-cha.

Asahina-san was slightly bewildered, but as if sensing that Yasumi's determination was genuine she replied, "Umm, this is Suzumiya-san's teacup, and this is Kyon-kun's. Oh, and also everyone's favorite temperature is different, so be mindful of that. Tea leaves are in the cupboard over there. I choose them according to the temperature and the humidity of the day. Right now, I'm finding out how these leaves…"

Nodding eagerly at her words, Yasumi's eyes glittered brilliantly as she followed Asahina-san's every little movement. She wasn't letting go even for a moment just like the lens of a long-range camera locked onto a target.

"And then I want to wear the maid dress too! Ah, let me try the nurse uniform too! Let me try it, pleeease?!"

I wondered what the source of Yasumi's vitality was that would rival even a 100,000 horsepower robot. Nuclear fusion? Or was it sunlight? Don't tell me this underclassman can undergo photosynthesis. To make things worse the first thing taught to this new member was how to make tea. Was she a business secretary?

But there's probably no point interfering. In reality there was essentially nothing else to be taught in this brigade. I put my bag on the floor, and sat opposite Koizumi.

"How about a game?" Koizumi was gazing at Yasumi with plenty of interest. Abruptly turning his sight away from her, he pushed the board on the table towards me.

"What's this?"

There were many round pieces on this strange board. With kanji characters like "General", "Elephant", "Cannon", and so on engraved on them, I had no idea how to move these mysterious pieces. It wasn't Othello, Go, or Shogi where Koizumi would lose repeatedly. Could Koizumi have finally brought a game where he stood a chance of winning?

"It's Chinese chess. It's called 'Xiangqi'. Once you remember the rules anyone can play this game. It's not that difficult at all really. At least this game will usually end faster than Shogi."

"Once you remember the rules, huh?" This was the problem. Until I remember the rules, wasn't it obvious that I would just keep suffering the pain of losing? Can't we just play cards? Oicho-kabu[2] or Koi-Koi preferably, since I have quite a lot of experience with them from playing with my family.

"Card games were somehow excluded in my list of choices. I'll be sure to bring them eventually. As for Chinese chess, if you could think of it as a zero-sum game similar to Go or Shogi, then that would be good enough to begin. You should be able to absorb the rules right

[2] Oicho-kabu is a traditional gambling game in Japan similar to blackjack, while Koi-Koi is a famous card game in Japan.

away. If you can look at a surrounded Go game and immediately determine who is winning and losing then you'll be fine. Since this board game does not involve luck as an important factor, I think you will enjoy it."

He flashed a relaxed smile. "Well then, let's start off with a few practices. The first match doesn't count. First, you would move the 'Soldier' piece this way."

He began explaining how to play in a pleasant manner. Hey, can you spare some thoughts about Yasumi instead of focusing on your games? She's a talented girl who managed to pass Haruhi's super-difficult brigade-entrance test almost without any sweat! Since she's a freshman she would probably become the next chief. Assuming that Haruhi wasn't blind and didn't make a mistake, what do you think Koizumi? Are her eyes made from lapis lazuli[3]?

Moving his piece, Koizumi smiled. Hey, that's a bit unnerving. It was a grin as if he had the time of a manager whose centerfield was frequently made to work hard by the leader of the shadows.

With a gesture as if gathering my pieces together, Koizumi leaned in his head, and whispered softly, "I am not worried about anything. Contrary to what you would imagine, I am completely relieved. No matter what happens after this, it should not be something bad. How about adopting the same attitude and relaxing?"

I had no confidence in his words. That was why I felt so rebellious. After all, have any of the new characters who have appeared left without doing anything? Even if that wasn't the case, Sasaki, Tachibana, Kuyou, and our nameless time-traveler have appeared. All of them gave the impression of being strange, but they seem to not be doing anything. That action in itself was mysterious, because it would bring up the question of why they appeared in the first place. If they were just foreshadowing characters in a novel, wouldn't that be too careless? They did go somewhere else after simply greeting us the other day.

If that was foreshadowing in a mystery novel, I wouldn't even read it. I'd just toss the book at the wall the moment the detective started trying to solve the mystery with logic.

"Calm down. The readers should enjoy it with a more light-hearted view in mind. However poor the work is, it would surely come in handy sometime in the future. There's a saying that the best teachers are those who teach using bad examples from which people can learn."

That's the first time I've heard that saying.

"Yeah. I thought of it just now. But I don't think it's a wrong lesson to impart."

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[3] A relatively rare semi-precious stone that has been prized since antiquity for its intense blue color.

"…Hegel[4] was a great person."

At my mutter, Koizumi flashed a smile. "Exactly. Above providing the life of a society, humans are also philosophers who leave the most beneficial advice behind. It's possible for any human to put that into practice."

But then, I had no idea how Hegelian dialectic could be related to this game of Chinese chess. Thus, being taught by Koizumi, I learned how each piece moved. It was generally similar to Shogi, but the finer details were quite different. Oh well, I was rather bored with Othello and Shogi, and learning a new board game wasn't exactly that bad.

While concentrating on Koizumi and the chess game, I also shot quick glances at the other members. Nagato was quietly reading a book. The new member who joined the brigade was after all a potential new member for the literature club. Could she have thought about this? A year ago the atmosphere in this classroom was as unchanging as the endless frozen land of Iceland. The open book on her lap was light brown in color but at the same time it could also be a rare book dug out from an old bookstore. Had her locations of activity begun expanding from solely the city library? I imagined Nagato visiting old, desolate bookstores, moving from one book rack to another slowly and somehow managed to calm down.

My battle with Koizumi on the board had just begun to get exciting when,

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" Along with the bright voice like music from a piccolo, Yasumi barged into my field of vision from the side holding a serving tray with hot drinks.

Behind her Asahina-san in a maid dress looked at us without hiding her excitement. "It's called redbush tea. There's no caffeine and it's good for preventing constipation. It's nutritious as well! Please try it!"

She hadn't dressed in her maid attire yet. In her slightly rumpled uniform, Yasumi painstakingly placed the teacups, from which hot steam was drifting on the table in front of Koizumi and myself.

The names "Kyon" and "Koizumi-kun" were written respectively on our teacups by Haruhi in bold and vivid strokes. Since these words were written on the ready-made cups by thick magic pens, the tea set did not exude any sense of "Wabi" or "Sabi"[5]. Nevertheless, for someone like me who did not have any knowledge of tea, oh never mind.

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[4] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was a German philosopher, one of the greatest in German Idealism: a philosophical movement that emerged in Germany in the late 18th and 19th centuries.
[5] Wabi-sabi represents a comprehensive Japanese world view or aesthetic centred on the acceptance of transience. The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete".

Trying as hard as possible not to look into Yasumi's glittering eyes, I took a sip from the red-colored tea. Koizumi did the same a few seconds later.

"…It has an unusual taste." Koizumi expressed his opinion with a bittersweet smile. I felt exactly the same way. It did not taste horrible, but upon finer tasting it did not taste delicious either. Instead it had a strange taste which did not suit my tastes. If that was the case then I should be able to drink the green tea and barley tea in one gulp without holding back. But I was more reluctant to honestly voice the report my tongue conveyed from the taste buds.

"Well, how do I put it…It's not something we've tasted before. Um…I know very well that this tea is good for the body. It feels like a good way to keep healthy."

"Wow!" With an overjoyed shout Yasumi moved light-footedly to Nagato and served tea in her teacup as well.

"……"

On Nagato's teacup, the name "Yuki" was decided without asking her opinion, and written by Haruhi. She glanced coolly at the cup and,

"……"

As if looking at dried-up sprouts before being watered, she did not respond and returned to reading her book. Because this was always the case we were not the least offended by it, but Yasumi looked at Nagato as if asking how she found the tea. Not receiving even a twitch in response, she leaped back to Asahina.

"Wait, wait, wait." The owner of the raised voice was the absolute and complete ruler of this region of time and space. "What about my tea?"Haruhi's dissatisfied face appeared from behind the display screen. "Shouldn't something like this be served first to the brigade chief? What are you trying to pull by serving me last? Mikuru-chan, you must teach her properly."

"Ah…Sorry." Panicking, Asahina-san clasped her hands together hurriedly.

Beside her Yasumi snickered. "I'm sorry. I forgot. I guess I was nervous. I'll do my very best in making your tea, so please hold on a minute." She did not seem disturbed in the slightest by Haruhi's crocodile eyes.

Like a winged fairy Yasumi lightly proceeded to bring the steaming hot tea to the brigade chief's desk. As usual Haruhi gulped down the tea, which was already near to her, in one go. She rolled her eyes moments later and started gasping with her tongue hanging from her mouth like a dog in the midst of summer.

"Remember carefully. This is quite important. Mikuru-chan, you are the teacher, so you must be strict with Yasumi."

Since when did Asahina-san become Yasumi's teacher?

"Oh well, since it's just tea, it's all right."

Haruhi's mood change was quick. She probably did not even have the time to relish the tea. "Yasumi Watahashi-chan right? Are you good with computers?"

"Just a little bit. But I can do it, yes I can!"

"Oh? Well then," The monitor on the brigade's chief desk, obtained from the Computer Club, showed the SOS Brigade website just like how I had first made it some time ago. It was simply a shabby layout with some lame content, a few rows of words, and topped off with an email address. Naturally in this age of rapidly progressing technology our homepage could only be described as being seriously outdated. It gave the feeling of how wide the technological gap was.

It should be redesigned soon. Haruhi was very determined about it, but eventually that duty was left entirely to me. Thus, not having the slightest desire to do it, I had come up with all sorts of excuses and procrastinated doing it all along.

In reality, ever since the name SOS Brigade appeared on the Internet network it seems no one had benefited from it at all. Last year the incident involving the Computer Club President was a good example. Because of that I had hoped that Haruhi would conveniently forget about this and yet the webpage view count had increased dramatically. Looks like to this day Haruhi still hadn't abandoned the ambition of becoming widely known on the Internet. Obviously, Haruhi didn't know or realize that Nagato had edited the logo.

"I want this website to be more attractive to the public. Can you do it?" Haruhi pointed at the monitor screen on which she had been working on for some time. "It's the SOS Brigade's main website. Kyon made it last year but it looks so empty and useless. Worst of all it's completely ugly. There are lots of stylish sites filled with plenty of information and yet our website is like this. At this rate the whole World Wide Web will cry."

Sorry about that.

"So Yasumi-chan, could you play around with this computer and make our site more presentable? Oh yeah, this is the first training task for new members. It's a big mistake to think that those entry trials ended just like that. It's not easy to become a true member of the brigade."

"Okay! I'll do it! I'll do it! Please let me do it!" Whether or not Yasumi understood the full implication of Haruhi's words, she had given a prompt reply for the time being. "I want to try it! I'll do it! Lemme do it!!"

Like a drum echoing heavily after being hit, her transparent, upbeat reaction induced little surprise on my part. And then finally, "Hey, have you tried making a website before?"

“Nope!” She replied, beaming like my little sister upon receiving an animal chess set as a present. “But wait! I feel that I can do it! Cause I’d love to be of assistance to all of you. So, since it’s just a computer, I’ll show you that I can break it in!”

Computers were just boxes that performed calculations. No matter how much breaking in you did, it still wouldn’t obey your orders like a hunting dog. What do you think it was? An omnipotent tool?

However, there wasn’t enough time to stop her. Brushing aside Haruhi, who was sitting at the desk, Yasumi pulled the keyboard towards her, grabbed the wireless mouse, and started working away busily like a female office clerk on her work. Looks like her typing skills were quite good.

After browsing through the data on the hard disk, “Ah, this tool has lots of things in its collection. But, what's this? If this app is available then I think you could have made a more fancy-looking site before. Who made this site? It’s so full of useless tags. Ah, I haven’t seen such a textbook site in some time. The table designation is also ugly. Umm, source display…Ah, whoa! It’s horrible. What does this bunch of font tags mean… Ahh! You didn’t even use Style Shot? Something like this can be done by middle-school students with a tiny bit of computer knowledge, Senpai.”

Didn’t Haruhi just clearly state that I was the one who made this website? Those were rather rude comments coming from an underclassman, don’t you think? I’ll remember that one, Yasumi Watahashi!

“Well then, let me play with this for a bit!” Announcing her intent in a bright voice as if she was enjoying herself, Yasumi started operating the computer freely. While doing that, Yasumi hummed something like a mixture of tunes. Upon closer hearing, she was actually humming a proper tune. I thought I’ve heard that tune before. Then I realized that it was one of the songs Haruhi sang while participating as a stand-in vocalist for the Light Music Club due to some emergency during the cultural festival last year. Since she’s in her freshman year now, she would still have been in middle school back then. Looks like she had come over and heard it by chance.

Even I could not deny how brilliantly Haruhi shined that time. After that occasion, Haruhi, who had awakened to band activities, basically pulled us in to help out. That turned out to be a miscalculation.

Standing behind Yasumi holding her second cup of tea, Haruhi exuded an air of satisfaction. She was in a good mood, clearly delighted like a manager who after putting in much effort had found a capable subordinate. From this day onwards, the miscellaneous difficult duties would be assigned to her. Such determination could be seen growing slowly on Haruhi’s countenance like fungi spores scattered about the land.

Finally I could be relieved from these miscellaneous responsibilities. But that would only be my naïve dream. It was still up to Haruhi, who was always unsurpassed in making obstinate and unreasonable decisions. The best I could expect was a treatment even worse than Yasumi received. To be overtaken by an underclassman in one day... It looked like I am standing on gradually thinning ice. Well I'm not too beat-up about it.

As soon as the game of Chinese chess between Koizumi and I ended, we finished the tea Yasumi served. Obviously, I won but I didn't feel too overjoyed. Probably it was because I wasn't used to the game yet. Thus I was a bit tired.

"How does another game sound?"

Ignoring Koizumi's invitation doubling as a search for vengeance, I lazily stretched my limbs. My eyes chanced upon a cardboard box in front of me. The SOS Brigade's "spoils of war" were stuffed into the box located on the rack a long time ago. They were tentatively the furnishings of our brigade.

Inside the box were the bats and gloves we used in the baseball competition last year.

This uncomfortable feeling was perhaps due to the presence of this foreign entity, the new underclassman/brigade member, and also a faint wariness towards her. Well, there was the incident on the phone too. I realized this and said,

"Hey Koizumi, how about playing catch?" It was a baffling suggestion, especially one coming from me.

"Oh?" After gazing into my eyes for a second Koizumi beamed. "That sounds good. Our bodies will deteriorate if we don't participate in some physical activity. Moderate exercise is also good for your health and improving your creativity."

After the decision was made, without so much as a stretch Koizumi promptly took down the cardboard box from the shelves and took out two grubby pairs of gloves and a tennis ball. There were soft and hard balls inside, but knowing Koizumi he had already read and understood my intentions.

There have been five of us in the SOS Brigade for the past year. The first underclassman, who had slipped in and filled the void of freshmen we left behind when we moved into our second year, couldn't yet be considered part of our group. Maybe it was because the five of us had been plunging into various occult and scientific happenings as a group of five, but now that the pentagram had become a hexagram I felt a sense of instability deep within me. This conclusion I was able to reach.

Simply speaking, I somehow felt, not thought, that Yasumi's abrupt appearance in this previously stable room was a foreign existence. Henceforth, whatever duties would be assigned

to Yasumi, and whether Haruhi felt satisfied by Yasumi's current role, I found it very hard to fully approve of any of it.

The call I received from her while I was bathing was another thing. Even if that was due to her premature and overeager desire to join the club, why did she call me? Well, there was probably no point calling Nagato, Asahina-san or Koizumi. That was because the three of them had special, behind-the-scene responsibilities. Even so, there wasn't supposed to be any meaning in calling me either. Yasumi had even hung up without properly introducing herself! Geez, looks like we have an underclassman whose intentions couldn't be understood just like Haruhi!

In other words, I felt like escaping from this room in which Yasumi was present. Thus I had come up with the practical excuse to play catch. That was certainly an activity that definitely couldn't be done in the clubroom.

"Well then…" I started speaking to Haruhi, who was watching over Yasumi's work, Asahina-san, who had begun to research brewing new types of tea, and Nagato, who was completely absorbed in reading her book. "We'll go out for a bit. I suppose there's nothing we can help with even if we stay behind. We might even get in the way of you three. I'll leave the preliminary training of the new brigade member to you guys."

With two pairs of baseball gloves already in his hands, Koizumi displayed a faint smile to no one in particular. "That's right. During times like this, we should let the girls in our brigade carry on with their activities undisturbed and without restraint. Since we men would only be in the way, we shall be taking our leave for a short while."

The best wing-man one could have in this world was this assistant brigade chief.

After shooting a fleeting glance at me Haruhi replied, "Why not have a girls' day in? You bring up a good point Koizumi-kun. I want to teach what Kyon's done so far as a brigade member to Yasumi-chan too just in case something happens. Yasumi-chan, did you hear me? I'll tell you why this guy is the only one in our brigade without an official rank. I guess this is what we'll have to do today. We'll use him to teach you what not to do. The main principle of our brigade is absolute contribution to the whole. You'll be able to overtake Kyon in no time at all."

Ah, okay, okay. Well, as long as you see things this way, I'm relieved. It was my desire to graduate peacefully this way, without being forced into any bizarre rank in the brigade.

I gave Koizumi a meaningful look. Seemingly receiving my eye signal correctly, Koizumi tossed the grubby-looking gloves at me.

"Well then, we'll excuse ourselves first. We'll return after we've had fun playing."

With a huge wink that I could easily hear the "kink!" sound effect, he put his hand over my shoulder. "It's been a long time since we've had our guys-only time. Let's have fun together."

Turning back before I left the classroom, I observed that Nagato was immersed in reading her book as usual. Asahina-san was saying to herself “I wonder if I should blend this tea with something different,” while analysing the tea set with a serious face. Finally, with a mysterious and complicated expression on her face and her mouth half-opened, Haruhi was observing Yasumi, who seemed to be skilful with computers, as if she understood what Yasumi was doing, but in fact she didn’t.

With just the addition of a new freshman brigade member it looks like the atmosphere, and even the room itself, had changed a lot.

Leaving the clubroom building, Koizumi and I started playing catch in the courtyard. No matter how we tried, we couldn’t appear like two male students with too much spare time in their hands trying to kill time. Fortunately, there was a lawn between the school block and the clubroom block. This spot could be easily seen from the open window of the third-floor literature clubroom. We could also look up and, even at our distance, we would realize instantly if one of them was at the window.

“Just one extra girl, and now things have become colorful,” Koizumi said and threw the ball which zoomed right towards me.

“Hmm? You mean it would have been better if it was a boy?”

Catching the slow ball I threw back at him, Koizumi replied. “It’s about balance. Don’t you think it’s not good that there are only two guys and yet there are four girls? Our right to speak out wasn't properly balanced before this. Now it’s only going to get worse due to our new member.”

Pathetic words, but that was the truth. Frankly speaking, our problem was that Haruhi expressed her opinions as loud as a bass loudspeaker.

“It won’t be easy handling that girl too.” Koizumi’s throw became increasingly powerful.

“Is there anything strange about Yasumi’s background?”

With a sound, I caught the bright-colored ball with my gloves.

“Nope,” Koizumi replied with a mysterious smile. “You can be assured of that. There isn’t any strange organization backing her. She’s completely innocent. Not belonging to anything, not being directed by anyone, that girl is her own master. Because of that, I find her a very interesting person.”

I grasped the ball, and looked hard at it as if it was a fresh-picked lemon. “Stop beating around the bush, Koizumi. If you know something, just say it. What’s her intention in infiltrating the SOS Brigade?”

“I don’t know her reason.” Koizumi lifted his hands as if in surrender. “I could only guess, or rather conjecture it.” And then he easily caught the ball I threw with a wind-up motion.

Shall we hear that one conjecture? “Suzumiya-san desired it.”

That kind of reasoning again?

“There was a decision that Yasumi Watahashi must be made into a member of the SOS brigade. Suzumiya-san wished for that and chose for things to be this way. The new brigade member selection test was probably the result of her she firm belief that Yasumi is a necessary person. Perhaps she manipulated reality subconsciously.” Above all, Koizumi looked at me. “Why did you suddenly think of asking me out to play catch? An invitation from you... Well, let me see how many times that’s happened.”

Don’t ask me. I don’t know why I had a feeling I had to use baseball equipment at a time like this. Since the gloves and the ball had been left aside for a long time, I disliked the idea of letting them turn into tsukumogami[6].

“I see.” Seemingly accepting the explanation on the spot, Koizumi continued. “If the things in the clubroom possess will of their own then it will finally accelerate the clubroom’s evolution into a different time-space. Nevertheless, I can understand how you feel. I also felt like playing catch, or rather felt like I had to play catch. It was as if I was seized with this strange compulsion to do it.”

The ball hit Koizumi’s palm and dropped. He picked it up.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. But, there’s a possibility that it was an inevitable outcome. That we were required to play catch ball here. It's just like what the time-travelers would say. This would be a predetermined event.”

I don’t get it. If that’s the case, Asahina-san or Asahina-san (big) should have sent me messages in a roundabout fashion. But that isn't happening. First, what does my make-believe game of baseball with you signify to the future?

“It’s better if you ask Asahina-san about that I think…” Glancing at the third-floor clubroom, Koizumi sighed softly. “She looks like she doesn’t know anything about this. What’s more, we did this voluntarily. There is a higher possibility that we are just imagining things. If we are suspicious of even something like this it will be more like what the time-travelers thought would happen. As people of the past, we do not want to lose our perspective of what we have

[6] An artifact spirit, believed to originate from items that have reached their 100th birthday and thus become alive and aware.

now solely to what we expect would happen in the future. It's not related in any way to espers and the Organization, but rather it would be our respective pride as those living in the present."

I doubt this was his real reason.

Sensing something unexpected he continued with his diatribe, "It's fine to be looked down upon. Our opponent belongs to a bigger organisation with more power. However, I personally find it unacceptable to resign myself to being looked down upon. The stronger the enemy is, the more likely it is that they will face sudden revolts. All over the world and across generations, wouldn't one call this the 'path of royalty'?"

Like the battle royales from those weekly magazines huh? If there was such a thing as instant training, or perhaps the sudden awakening of a hidden ability that could nab Kuyou and the others in one swoop, then the curtains won't have to close on me.

"You're quite—" Koizumi executed a change-up pitch throw "—suitable for that role. Suzumiya-san is backing you up, and you her. Together there is nothing in this universe which cannot be done by the both of you." And then, grinning broadly, he continued. "I've said this before, but it would be better if both of you start off again as Adam and Eve. Or rather in the context of Japan, Izanagi and Izanami[7]. As long as you continue to be fruitful and multiply, in time the earth will be filled with people like Suzumiya-san and yourself. A rather surreal but pleasant scene to behold. Wouldn't you agree with that?"

You're already entering the domain of incredulity. I have no intention of playing the tsukkomi[8]. Moreover, since all of the people will be descendants of Haruhi, I doubt history would continue like in the days of Noah's Ark. If the captain had any common sense, he would abort the mission.

Even if it was for historical scholarship, I would still downright refuse such a suggestion. Go ahead and dig up the frozen soil underneath Mount Ararat. You might even find a spaceship made of wood.

"It's a shame." Holding the ball in his hand, Koizumi swung his arm like a windmill. "But at the same time I am relieved. I would like to see you guys for a while longer. Nagato-san, Asahina-san, and the rest as well. Humans are born on this world as the only living being with imagination and inquisitiveness. As one of them I intend to see it through to the end."

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[7] In Japanese mythology, Izanagi and his sister/spouse, both deities themselves, bore many islands, deities and forefathers of Japan.

[8] The terms "boke" and "tsukkomi" originate from manzai—a traditional Japanese two-person stand-up comedy. The "boke" role makes obvious mistakes, misunderstandings etc when they talk about a topic. On the other hand, the "tsukkomi" role would quickly point out the other person's mistakes and laugh at them.

At this point, Koizumi changed the subject abruptly. “Are your after-school lessons with Suzumiya-san going well?”

How would I know? In order to preserve the tranquillity I summed it up. “Thanks to it, I’m doing better in schoolwork now. But it’s not exactly being tutored. Rather, it seems as if she really enjoys the fun in teaching.”

“That’s good. Both you and Suzumiya-san will go for post-secondary education, right? If both of you could go to the same university and enjoy your lives, it would help me as well. Please study hard for the university entry examinations.”

It’s fine. Financial woes are more than enough worries for my future. Luckily, since I am still at my second year, I don’t have to panic now and study every day like for students in their final year. I have more important things to do.

“Oh? And what might those be?”

…For example, a new game I didn’t get a chance to buy, or the accumulating pile of games I heard were good, but haven’t tried yet.

Koizumi displayed a faint smile. Looking at the student in the same year as me, who was killing time with me and smiling faintly as if out of exasperation, why did it get on my nerves so much? Damn it. Sometimes I wanted to smile like that too—maybe when I was engulfed by cigarette smoke around me. That smirk of his…

“Well then, what kind of pitch do you want next? I can throw a Cutter, Knuckleball, Slider, or one of a few others that I know of.”

Please just pitch a ball that I can catch. Unfortunately, I don't have the experience of a catcher. Just call me the eternal Player Two.

Koizumi’s next pitch was a super straight ball. Perhaps it was a certain declaration of intent. It was a pitch with a force that should have been impossible coming from Koizumi’s arm. Since you have such amazing pitching skills, you should have stood for the relief mound in last year’s baseball match. If you have any other hidden skills, it’s high time you disclosed them.

For some time, we played catch without a word. Since I was not particularly interested in baseball, I felt like I was getting tired of it. That was when something came to me…

“Hmm?” Koizumi looked up and I followed suit.

A paper plane.

A childish-looking paper plane, which gave off the feeling of it being properly folded according to a manual, was circling above our heads. The plane, dropping gently due to

insufficiently strong wind, traced the path of a high-jump athlete failing to perform a proper landing and eventually hit the ground on its tip in front of me. I noticed that it was made from the copy paper in our clubroom.

I picked it up. A word was hurriedly written with a felt-tip pen on its wings.

OPEN!

Before Koizumi could reach me, I quickly unfolded the paper plane into a creased piece of paper and stiffened for a moment. With the same felt-tip pen, the brief handwritten words on the inside gave me a huge shock.

MIKURU folder discovered!

Naturally, I reacted by looking up to the clubroom window. Depending on who the person standing on the window was, I better prepare myself for the questioning session which would certainly ensue. My heart leaped anxiously, but…

The one looking down from the third floor open window was Yasumi Watahashi, no mistake about it. After confirming that I had received the message from this primitive airmail system, she put her index finger at her lips, and like an actress on stage, disappeared with light movement from the window.

Evidently Yasumi's IT skills must not be underestimated. Having grown accustomed to Asahina-san, who was a complete amateur at computers, and Haruhi, who did not use the computer apart from doing some miscellaneous things and performing precise calculations, I had become careless. Nagato would probably discover it, but that was not a problem since her mouth was always firmly shut hard like iron ore.

But then, she was able to open it despite the folder being password-protected and hidden. I had to tighten the security. Maybe I should talk this over with the Computer Club president one of these days…

"Is there anything amiss? And what's written on…" With a greedy-looking face, Koizumi reached out his hand towards the paper aeroplane in my hand, but…

"Don't let it bother you. It's just a little secret between Asahina-san and I. It's just some trivial news which won't have any effect on your life."

Koizumi did not reply. He shot me a knowing smirk, which I ignored.

And then, I looked up to the classroom again. Covered at its side, the curtain fluttered in the spring breeze. Because of that curtain, I could not grasp the situation inside the room.

I had thought about it just now, but I had to express my view towards Yasumi again.

“What a strange girl.”

After a while, we returned to the clubroom. Standing in front of the computer, Haruhi seemed over the moon. “Kyon, look here! Come look at this awesomely beautiful page!”

Passing the baseball equipment over to Koizumi, I went over to Haruhi, who was moving the mouse excitedly like a kitten playing with a ball of thread.

“Oh?” Upon seeing the display on the screen, I mouthed a strange exclamation mark. "This…is the website of SOS Brigade?”

“Yeah, duh. Can’t you see the big words over here?”

The logo was indeed written that way. However, there were no traces of the home page that I had once made half-heartedly. The wallpaper, fonts, index—everything had been transformed. And on top of that, parts of the words were now glittering and moving, not to mention the color of the display screen was extremely flashy. If the website I created earlier were to be an Adamski model, the one now would be like a Chandelier. But wasn't this design too much?

“Something like this would surely catch other people’s eyes.” Haruhi was in high spirits, as if she had made the website herself. “Besides, the Internet world advances at a rapid rate. If you don’t use the technology they develop after so much hard work, then what’s the point? Yasumi-chan has just utilised the available materials to their fullest potential. See, if you click here—“

Some music, which for a website made using free tools was not surprising, could be heard. To be honest, it was noisy.

Glaring at the website—which was full of examples of how a webpage should not be made—

“What’s on the content page?”

“An e-mail form.”

That’s all?

“That’s all I could think of!” Pouting, Haruhi continued. “I wanted to upload lots of pictures at the activity report section, but you objected.”

Ah, Asahina-san’s pictures? She has a long memory indeed.

“But, I have this.” She moved the mouse cursor and stopped at the “Games” part. Along with the sound of her “click”, the display changed. With a space-like background, it seemed to be the menu of some sort of game. Its title was written in a fanciful font.

"*The Day of Sagittarius*…5?"

"I received it from the Computer Club President."

Don't say that like nothing happened!

"It's an improved online version of the game we played last time. He said that we can fight with anyone from across the world. I don't really get it, but we should definitely put this on our webpage right? Obviously anyone can play for free."

Who would want to pay for this? But then, if this game had been developed to version 5, it seems like they were very serious about it. That would probably explain their reaction when they lost to us. Oh well, you reap what you sow, guys.

"Incidentally, I've already asked the Computer Club's for help in the development of our next game. So the next one won't be exactly like the SOS Brigade. I want a different type of game."

You ordered them, right? The Computer Club, who were probably commanded to create a SOS-Brigade-style game, would have felt bewildered by that order. While I was thinking about how to alleviate their problem, I realized something abruptly.

"So where is she?"

Yasumi Watahashi could not be seen in the clubroom. The other people in the room were only Nagato, reading a book by the corner, Koizumi, who had put back the gloves and ball and was returning to his seat, and Asahina-san, who was pouring tea. While serving the cups of tea from the tray, she replied. "She just went home."

"Eh?" Leaving early on the first day?

"She said she had some urgent business to attend to. She apologized many times before running off just now." Serving tea to me, Asahina-san seemed to be smiling more happily than usual. When I asked her about that, "She's so cute!" was what she replied in a charmed voice.

"Her voice, the way she speaks, her behaviour, her expressions, the way she bows—everything just reflects how cute she is. Seriously…" Hugging the tray to herself, Asahina-san was wiggling about in adoration. But then, being able to capture the heart of her lovely upperclassman in such a short time, this Yasumi Watahashi was quite frightening.

"Well, I'm not that convinced." Haruhi gazed at Asahina-san with a half-exasperated look. "Seriously, the way she looks when she was in a hurry, jumping up and down just like a young chick, is kind of annoying. But…I'm glad you're getting along fine with her. She knows a lot of things, so it looks like we won't get bored for a while. It's only the first day, but I think I've spent enough time to catch a glimpse of what she's capable of."

Still wiggling her body in adoration, Asahina-san continued. “Nagato-san also thought she was soooo cute. She must be very good at making friends.”

At this point, Asahina-san had finally come back to her senses; or rather, perhaps she noticed Koizumi, who was looking fixedly at the top of his side of the table, and started looking for the Vice Leader's teacup with the teapot in her other hand. Turning my gaze towards Nagato, I tried my best to imagine what sort of plans she had to build up a relationship of trust with her.

Looks like Nagato interpreted my thoughts correctly. Slowly lifting her head from the sea of words, “I lent her a book.” She whispered thus in an over-suppressed voice. She seemed to feel that more elaboration was needed right after that, and added. “She wanted to borrow it.”

Looking satisfied after that, she lowered her gaze again towards her book.

“The name of the book kinda felt like a character from some Greek mythology.” Haruhi said casually. My impatience passed through my throat as if I swallowed some dry ice. However, since Nagato did not respond to Haruhi, I had to assume a poker face.

Thankfully, Haruhi dropped that subject after that. She stopped mentioning Nagato’s book, closed the browser with a few quick clicks, and turned off the computer. Those actions were equivalent to her announcing that the day’s club activities were over.

“It’s a good sign that the newcomer came early in this new school year. We, the SOS Brigade, must not neglect proper upbringing of the next generation. We have to display a strong spirit, something like the brigade surviving even if the entire school is demolished. We are the foundation for this Brigade—or rather, we must become the foundation for it.”

While standing, I took a sip from my teacup.

“Since you’ve said it, things will probably be that way.”

Replying half-heartedly, Yasumi’s face popped into my mind. I was really in her debt because she kept mum about Asahina-san’s folder, which only I could use. But still, I felt uneasy about it. Stealing a sideway glance, I noticed that, Nagato didn’t even lift her face from the hardcover book she was holding, just like usual for her really. While she was serving tea to Koizumi, Asahina-san was just like before. But then, as the only new member handpicked by Haruhi, Yasumi would probably not be normal. She might not seem that way at all, but there should be something.

The phone call I received when I was bathing, that sense of unease that had been tailing me since a few days ago, everything made me feel fuzzy. Well, even if you said that this was due to the unresolved, pending case of Sasaki, Kuyou, the nameless time-traveler, and Kyouko Tachibana, then why did I still remember that feeling of premonition specifically towards Yasumi herself? Perhaps that was also someone’s hopeful disorientation of my directions?

Yasumi wasn't a half-hearted person, unlike what a normal enemy or friend would be like. My impression of her was different from Nagato and Asahina-san, and also Kuyou and Kyouko Tachibana and the rest. If anything, I shot a sideways glance at Haruhi, who was packing her stuff whilst humming an unknown tune, she wasn't an alien, or an esper, or a time-traveler. The feeling I got from Yasumi Watahashi was…closer to that of Haruhi's and Sasaki's.

But then, I did not know why.

I felt a sense of uncertainty like I was mistaking "chikuwa" with "chikuwabu"[9] and popping it into my mouth. It felt somewhat similar to a familiar premonition. In that manner, I arrived home, opened the door to my room, and was stunned.

"Kyon-kun, welcome home!"

That was from my sister while smiling like an over-friendly cat. On the other hand, just as I had expected, Shamisen was lying down waiting on the bed with a face of an extremely unfriendly person. Since this was just the usual scene greeting me, there was nothing to be surprised about.

The reason which caused me to stare with my mouth agape was the discovery of someone whom I had seen just now. That person who was sitting in front of my sister. Upon my entry, she stood up immediately like a pencil rocket launching into the sky.

"Welcome home, Senpai! Sorry for disturbing your room!" Shouting in a bright voice, she gave me a deep bow. A proper one.

"Wh…"

I had absolutely no idea what was going on…

Yasumi Watahashi was in my room. I thought it was just a hallucination. But if that was the case, it would become a serious problem since it was such an utterly impossible situation.

Yasumi had left in a hurry due to some things to be done. So what was her business here? Why was she here?

No…Wait…Let's calm down. Until today, after being caught up in various inexplicable events, I should be accustomed to them now, if not unwillingly and grudgingly. I recalled the time when Haruhi disappeared or the innumerable times I had travel across time. Compared to those incidents, this case was just a new brigade member waiting for my return in my room; a perfectly common situation. Let's just treat this as a mystery novel in which the criminal's

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[9] "Chikuwa" is a kind of Japanese food made from mince fish, rolled into a tube, and steamed or broiled. "Chikuwabu" is a type of wheat starch made by mixing wheat flour, salt and water, kneaded, and rolled into a tube.

motives were not explained. Okay, I've calmed down. To find out what's going on, first, I should ask the one closest to me.

Putting her hands together in front of her chest, Yasumi faced me with glittering eyes. "I had wanted to come yesterday. But, that went longer than I had planned. I shouldn't have hesitated."

Her explanation did not make any sense. Planned? Hesitated? What's that? Well let's leave that aside for now. I grabbed my carefree, ever-smiling sister at her neck,

"Did you bring her up?"

"But!" My sister struggled. "She said she's a friend of yours!"

That's too naïve. If she had already been acquainted with her, then that would be a different case. I had to teach her not to trust people she didn't recognize so quickly. A brother-to-sister education.

Before I could put together a draft for my sermon, Yasumi came to her rescue.

"When I met her at the door, I knew instantly that she was Senpai's sister. Haha, what a good girl! I want a sister like her too! One that I can hug her and sleep with! And oh, the cat! What a handsome calico cat! He looks so smart! Oh, I'm impressed!"

After blazing away like a runaway train, Yasumi seemed slightly crestfallen. "But I can't take care of pets anymore. That's a shame…but then! I love coming to other people's houses to play with their pets!!!"

Feeling slightly overwhelmed by her high-spirited voice, I threw my head back and replied. "So…you told them that you had to leave earlier due to some things to do. Don't tell me that your business is…"

"Exactly! I wanted to come to Senpai's house like this, at least once. Hehe!" Replying innocently, the strange thing about Yasumi's countenance and tone was their weightlessness. She bowed, and her characteristic hair clip shook slightly.

"Hey!" My sister pulled at Yasumi's sleeve. "So I was saying just now. I want a hair clip like yours! It's not sold in shops anymore right? Please!"

"Sorry!" Yasumi bent down and looked straight into my sister's round eyes. "This is a treasure I've had since I was small like you. I can't give it to you now. But I might drop by again sometime in the future. We're just two small boats riding along the flow of this world. In the future, I should return here again, right? Same as this hair clip. It will come again, someday in the future."

The smiley-face hair clip held her hair together like a bird's nest. I had a feeling that it served a greater purpose, namely as a proof of her identity; but it was trifling to be bothered by such small details. What's more bothersome was the fact that while I was thinking about these things, Yasumi had walked about my room, looked under my bed, and pulled Shamisen by his ear—"This cat is awesome! Seriously!"—dashed towards my sister and hugged her, and finally stood perfectly still in front of me. She said clearly.

"I'm going home."

Oh I see. I could only reply like that. For some reason, I felt pitiable for only being able to say that much. I should have been able to use more proper vocabulary. I wanted to say something, but frustratingly, I couldn't put it into words.

She directed her piercing gaze directly towards me, though from a slightly lower position. Abruptly, her expression turned nostalgic, as if recalling the previous half of her life.

"After entering a new school, there are surely interesting parts; coincidental events which you seemed to be drawn to. Because of that, you enter a new club. All of these seem to be a dream. Even if you remain silent, these things will come to you from the other side. Isn't that so? Everyone feels that way towards the narrator of an interesting story. In it, there are a lot of interesting upperclassmen, and the subject becomes very close to one of them. I had wanted to be the main character of the story…"

It seemed like I had heard of these words and thought about them before; somewhere, sometime in the past. However, before I could even search for it within my long term memory, Yasumi lowered her head swiftly, and bent her petite body like a spring.

"Haha not really. Actually, I just wanted to come to your room by myself. Sorry for disturbing you. But I'm very satisfied. I won't come again."

Yasumi smiled at me. From her expression, I understood why even Asahina-san was head over heels with her. It was an expression like a small animal in full surrender towards its master. It was as if she was enveloped in pure, gentle light. After being gazed at with such eyes, no customer would be able to walk away from a pet shop without being affected by them.

"Well, let's meet again. Senpai, please don't hate me."

Right after she said that, Yasumi stroked my sister's and Shamisen's foreheads and dashed out of the room like the first storm of spring. I didn't even have time to ask her to wait. Before I realized it, the first-year underclassman aka the new brigade member had vanished from my house.

Shamisen yawned and stretched itself, but my sister picked it up and hugged it against its will.

“Who’s that girl??”

Right now, I’d love to know the answer that question.

“Ah…”

At that moment, I realized that I had forgotten to ask her something. Some time back, the person who rang me up when I was in the midst of a shower was, without a doubt, Yasumi.

But, why me? And for that reason, why couldn't she give just a short message just to inform her name? At that point, did she already believe that she would be the only one who would pass Haruhi’s brigade entry examination? She might be a psychic, but compared to someone like Koizumi, there were no such signs at all. Which meant that she was just a normal student who had entered North High by coincidence, and gotten involved in SOS Brigade by coincidence? That would be too coincidental to be true.

"There is no coincidence in this world. Everything is predetermined. Things which cannot be understood by humans are called as ‘coincidence’.”

Someone had said this. Or maybe this was a line from the novel Nagato had conveniently lent me.

While thinking about this absent-mindedly, I picked Shamisen up from my sister. It was rather meaningless, but I held Shamisen closed to my face till our noses almost touched. As usual, Shamisen seemed annoyed and turned away.

“What do you think of Yasumi?”

I knew I was just talking to myself, but I somehow felt like I was sharing my heart with someone else.

“Yasumi onee-chan? Is she Haru-nyan and Tsuru-nyan’s friend?”

From the side, my sister’s eyes were rounder than the calico itself. Shamisen seemed plainly bored. I lowered Shamisen onto the floor. At this point, Shamisen left my room, and fortunately my sister ran after him. Thus, my room was finally quiet.

No matter how I think about it, I just couldn’t get it. I felt like the assistant of a mathematician when he was explicitly told to solve the “Four fours”[10] puzzle from zero to infinity, without using the logarithm operator.

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[10] a mathematical puzzle in which one has to find the simplest mathematical expression for every whole number from zero to some maximum, using only common mathematical symbols and four “4” digits.

Yasumi Watahashi. First year student at North High. The first new member approved by Haruhi to join SOS Brigade.

Who exactly was she?

β-10

Thursday was the next day.

There were so many things going on in my head that I couldn't tell you which were good and which were bad. The one thing you could count on was me getting up and going to school and not paying attention in class. Starting with my right index finger, that's one.

It seems Haruhi's in the same mental funk that I'm in. Even before classes started her mind was already at the side of Nagato and how she was doing.

"Hey Kyon," Haruhi poked me in my back the very minute our first period ended."I'm not sure if I should try to get Yuki to go to a hospital or not with this thing she's got."

Rejected. I tried my best to stay firm like I was speaking to a toy-sized dog who had been in the family for quite a while.

"I think it's just a spring cold. I wouldn't want to overdo it for something small like that."

I felt a little sick saying that. Unfortunately what would happen if she went and somehow neither medicine nor nutritional remedies worked?

"But I'm so worried about her!" Haruhi started clicking her mechanical pencil. It was a completely unconscious motion that just goes to show how stressed she was. I tried my best to toss a suggestion out there.

"Have you asked Koizumi? Maybe there's something he can do to help your burden. But you know,"

I took a deep breath so that I could prepare my next statement.

"Nagato is the type of person who wants to stay cool and calm about everything. She has to approve for anything to happen to her. Don't you want to abide by her rules?"

"So it's like that huh? Still though," Haruhi's face was so cloudy from doubt that you couldn't even see Venus during the break of dawn. "I've got a bad feeling about this. Yuki's not been like this before. Well, not that I've seen of her anyways. Something is telling me that this isn't a normal illness; that it's on some bigger scale than usual."

Have you been watching some old sci-fi movies where the whole world gets into some panic about some unknown illness? I used to see those all the time when I was channel surfing.

"It's not that big yet! Such an old fashioned idea wouldn't fly in today's world. Now movies where Martians invade and spread some type of biological weapon through the world causing people to want to commit suicide would be more modern. That's the type of catastrophe

that people today would want to see! It’d also have people bravely going off to their deaths like saints and dying heroically wouldn't you think? Right? Right?!"

Haruhi gave a bitter smile as she commented on the state of science fiction movies today. She bent her nose and continued onward.

"It was a complete failure to even consult with you on this. How your half-hearted joke got us off track I don't know. Maybe I'm having a second childhood as I grow senile? Forget about it Kyon. Wait, don't forget about it! There'd be no one to share this memory with if it did happen because I'd be the only one who knew. Thus I approve you to remember it!"

Oh well. I already know that I don’t have an ability to come up with some type of crazy stupid story off the top of my head but I'd feel even worse if Haruhi recognized that it was that type of story now. There's plenty of morons out there in the world; there's no need for you to call me one and laugh. Yeah, that's how I'm feeling right now.

After that conversation Haruhi returned to being absent-minded all day. After classes were over she dashed outside of the class room like she was breaking out of a cocoon into a new body. It was like she was meditating like a Buddhist priest and then the end of class bell was her alarm clock. Quickly her soul and body became one again.

She threw her bag onto her shoulder. "I'm grabbing Mikuru-chan and going to Yuki's. You don't need to come. Go to the clubroom instead."

What the hell is there to do in the clubroom if Nagato and Asahina-san aren't there?

"New! Club! Members!"

Her tone was like that of an angry duck. "They might come to the clubroom for a follow-up visit. Besides, you and Koizumi are useless when going to Yuki's apartment to cheer her up."

Haruhi's few words sunk in. Isn't there a better way to say that?

"I've got a feeling Yuki's condition has gotten worse. It might be an angel of death coming for her, Kyon. Guys shouldn't enter a girl’s room like that when she's feeling her worst. That's both being rude and being a coward. It's alright if you and Koizumi-kun don't come with us. Go watch over the clubroom. That's what you should be doing as an SOS Brigade member."

And so that became a direct order from the brigade leader. There's something else that I can do though.

Think about it. There's one way for things to improve after this and it's from Kuyou. She's the cause of Nagato's illness after all. If we don't remove what's causing the problem, then there's no way that Nagato will get better.

One more thing: Fujiwara. I've not heard anything, but I've got a feeling everything so far has been a smokescreen. I'm certain that self-styled time-traveler and Kuyou are linked somehow or at least they have some kind of alliance going on. There's no doubt about that. I would guess that both sides are using Kyouko Tachibana for their own purpose. She's not quite at the level of Koizumi. Compared to the aliens and time-travelers, she's barely an actress in this play. I got that feeling when the kidnapping of Asahina-san was over. But no matter how clumsy she is, she's still Koizumi's rival. She'd be considered a minion type character, but we can't choose what roles we play in the game of life. Considering how good or bad it could have been for her, she miraculously turned out okay.

"…and then there's Sasaki."

I thought I had muttered that in a small voice but,

"Did you say something?"

The sharp ears of Haruhi caught my monologue.

Compared to her displeased expression and worry over Nagato I must have been embracing happiness with arms wide open.

"So do as I said and go to the clubroom today. I worry that you won't be able to keep a prospective first year company if one comes. Maybe you'll have to recruit more people to be effective in your task."

Hmph. She's treating me like I'm a child.

"Oh yeah! If something comes up give me a call. You could also get in touch with me like that too if you'd like. Later!"

And after saying that, Haruhi quickly exited the classroom. It was like she was part cat dander and we were cleaning the room.

She's constantly worrying about Nagato. I am too.

However our ways of worrying about her appear to be different. I have my way and Haruhi has her own way concerning Nagato. Neither one is right or wrong. There's no one way to worry about her.

But we both have found a response. Now how close would mine be to the core of the matter?

I chose to stop running like her a long time ago. Haruhi's taken over that role now, but what should I do?

I'll wait. Something soon will come to me. It won't take long. Kuyou's attack, Asakura's revival, and Kimidori's mindless chatter…

I'm sure all of that was simple foreshadowing. There's no way that all three of them could appear at that time by simple chance. It's an omen that only I was in the position to understand.

Very soon something will happen. Who'll move and who won't act are things I don't know yet.

I'm sure Sasaki's thinking the same thing. I'm sure all of these premonitions and feeling are something that's crossed over to her as well.

Perhaps Nagato isn't able to do anything about it. In that case it's up to myself, Haruhi and Sasaki now.

Though all of the details are unknown, those two people from the present day have reached a god-like level. They're the jewels of mankind that the alien terminals, inferior time travelling quacks, and espers have meddled with for so long. But there still exists the possibility that any one of those groups have laid a trap for us. I've long thought that they've laid one for Haruhi, but the chances they've laid one for Sasaki are quite low.

Something just hit me. What would happen if Haruhi and Sasaki seriously joined forces? The thought of those two ruling over the universe would make my heart melt like it was methane hydrate. But that'll never happen. Haruhi wouldn't wish for it and Sasaki would laugh at me the moment I proposed it. Both of them would think that I had a vivid hallucination or something.

"Alright."

As I was placing my barely packed school bag over my shoulder and heading to the club room I caught sight of one of the "Going straight home everyday" club Taniguchi.

Though I doubt he could be helpful in this situation I still opened my mouth to ask him something.

"Oi Taniguchi!"

"Huh?" Taniguchi turned around tiredly. While I too felt the same way as his aura was giving off, this guy was an important sample for me to test. He knows the person involved quite well. Who else has spent an incredible amount of time with an alien-built humanoid interface?

"Let me ask you something about Kuyou."

As soon as I said that all expression on Taniguchi's face dropped. What little life there was in his body completely vanished entirely like he was becoming the living dead.

"…Kyon man. I want to forget everything about that girl. I don't remember anything. That whole experience ruined me man. If I try to remember anything about her, I'll die. While I'll admit there are some things stuck in my memory, I'd be an idiot if I went through and tried to remember everything. I should've left as soon as you mentioned that girl's name. Think about how you'd feel if I came in here and jumped out of the window first thing tomorrow morning!"

Both heroism and stupidity were mixed together on Taniguchi's face. I really don't want to hurt him any more than what he was feeling but I couldn't help but continue pressing him. Besides it's high time for him to man up about the whole incident. Right now he's hurt but I'm sure if I helped him regain his optimistic view he had before his soul got dampened he should make a comeback. It'll be just like he referenced the Akashic Records.

"Before Christmas how did you and Kuyou meet? Was it a set-up for you two to go on a date?"

"I don't know."

Taniguchi's eyes were all over the place as he tried to remember.

"One day I heard her ask me out. It was right before Christmas, if I remember correctly. After that she was silent the whole time. I didn't understand anything about her since the day we met. Hey, she was pretty cute man!"

So you remember that time after all. I noticed her strange aura the day we met. Surely that didn't slip you by.

"Well you see," Taniguchi continued, "It was near the end of the year and by the New Years' celebrations. Couples go to various places around that time. I'd choose a place for us to go and then meet her at that spot."

Was there anywhere that this extraterrestrial robotic lifeform wanted to go? I know that Nagato unexpectedly liked it when we went to the library that one day. Maybe this other alien had somewhere like that.

Taniguchi continued not knowing my academic questions. "We went to the usual places. Movies, dinners, those types of things. Suou…was quite strange though. She really wanted to go to eat fast food. Sure they were convenient, but man they're expensive. I'm still wondering why she liked to go to such a strange place."

So during the approximately two months between Christmas and Valentine's that you spent together you had to have talked sometime. I can't think of anything Kuyou would want to talk about though.

"No, that's not the case," Taniguchi replied unexpectedly. "She would be quiet and even quieter but suddenly she opened up like you flipped a switch or something. She was kinda like that."

Kuyou spontaneously opening up?

"Ah, to tell you the truth I don't remember the stuff she said. Something about how cats are great, she feels humans are great owners for cats, and the such. She went on for like two hours about cats and humanity. Sometime during that speech my mind went blank. Then she wanted to talk about some other troublesome topics like that. She asked what I thought about humanity and the evolution we've undergone and then she'd reply about that. Then she talked about hundred million year periods of time. Oh I remember that conversation."

I couldn't imagine Kuyou going on and on like that. It's insane to think that. Maybe that Sky Canopy Domain terminal liked to switch topics or perhaps they switched insides every time they met with someone.

"Then why would you stick around with such an incorrigible girl?"

"Hey, for the first time in my life I was the one being asked out. Besides…she was a hottie man!"

So it comes to that. Any girl is good for this guy as long as they're cute. He's more or less an idiot but I'll forgive him for that. Thinking about the worst part of high school love I've seen, I had to ask,

"So tell me about when it ended."

As if he was playing the tragic star in a stage performance, Taniguchi looked up at the sky.

"I ran to where we were supposed to meet that day and the first thing out of her mouth was 'I made a mistake.' She didn't repeat it. By the time I came to my senses she was gone. That's it. I can count the number of times we've spoken since then as zero. For a little while after that I was stressing out like an idiot, but I've come to realize that I was 100% completely dumped."

That was right before Valentine's day this February. Koizumi and I were digging for our lives on that mountain. Then there was that situation when Asahina-san (Michiru) came from the near future. There were the first meetings I had with Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana. So the winter story of Taniguchi and Kuyou finished around that same time, huh?

While listening to Taniguchi continue on I noticed this guy kept leaving out her name.

What if Kuyou had gotten in touch with me before Haruhi's Christmas party planning session? There would've been another issue during that incident where Haruhi disappeared and

Nagato's this and that. Thank goodness Kuyou mistook Taniguchi for me at that time. I used up all the strength I had during that time in order to get back to the event on Tanabata four years ago. Thus I owe you a lot of thanks for looking after her during that time Taniguchi.

"You done talking?"

As I was pondering Taniguchi had gotten his bag and was in a ready to leave position.

"Ah…" I replied with a sunny face. "Taniguchi."

"What…What's that look on your face for?"

"While you've not been able to help me solve something, you've been a great guy. I guarantee that man."

"What?"

He was probably worrying about whether I was sane or not. In a pitying tone he replied,

"You guys have been acting strangely today. Did Suzumiya turn you down with like a kick to your head? Or did you both do something you regret huh?"

Taniguchi, who had turned around, instantly looked back. This bad friend had a smile on his face.

"So we're on equal ground now man. Kyon, just remember that you're an ordinary person. I was in that rejected club one year ago. Your time babysitting Suzumiya has finally ended. You don't have to worry about the difficulties taking care of her now."

Well that wasn't what I expected him to say. After showing me such an awkward facial expression he quickly dashed out of the classroom.

Having moved up together it looks like Taniguchi and I will end up singing *Aogeba tōtoshi* with one another at graduation. At that time both of us will have decided what we'll be doing after graduation and working towards those plans.

I don't know if we'll be going to the same university though. It's fine to be close friends in high school but it's unheard of to carry that through to university and prevent yourself from meeting new people; after all, you're in a new environment. It's only natural to begin new relationships. That's how our ancestors carried out their lives for some reasons we don't know. That's how I think it goes. It doesn't seem likely that staying in the same group of people is good for you.

But how does that apply to Haruhi?

She's our brigade leader. She's a god-like being. She's Haruhi Suzumiya.

After finishing that strange yet cheerful conversation with Taniguchi I took my usual stroll to the clubroom. I wasn't looking forward to only being in the clubroom with Koizumi by my side but since it was an order from the brigade leader I have no choice but to go. It'd be a serious event if any new freshmen stopped by. On the other hand, my future looks complicated from Haruhi if there weren't any new members either. She'd likely do some complex recruitment thing while I wasn't looking and cause a big scene. As a result of that I'd likely add to the wounds I've already gotten from her harebrained messes. Just how far is she going to take that desire of hers?

Here's something I heard from someone. The chances of hitting the lottery are about the same as riding in an airplane and having the plane crash. They're that low. Surely the chances of there being someone in this school who wanted to join the brigade would match that infinitesimal probability. Well, this school is neither a casino nor an airport so I can't really check for myself.

I believed that so strongly that I couldn't help but stumbled when I opened the door to the clubroom and saw the silhouette of a person inside.

"Huh?"

I couldn't pronounce anything else than that question. I said all of that stuff about chances and probability before, yet someone arrived in the clubroom before I did.

At the window a small girl stood up and quickly turned around. As she turned I was able to see that her uniform was very baggy and there was a hair ornament on her head with a permanent smiley face. She doesn't look like a freshman yet those are the color of our freshmen slippers. I got the feeling she was my junior, but why is that feeling like it's wedged into my soul? I've got a strong suspicion that she's met Asahina-san before somehow but I can't say why I know that.

"Ah?"

Crap, she heard my stupid reaction. It seems that this strange girl had seen me enter this room like I usually do when the other members are present. At least she's not pointing out that the only thing I've said is that idiotic utterance.

While my reaction was slow, this girl quickly responded to break this awkward silence.

"Ah, it's you Senpai?"

Her cheerful smile and tone bothered me. I've got no idea why she's just called me "Senpai."

Next this girl stood up straight, bowed, and then stuck her tongue out in a cutesy manner when she stood up again.

"Looks like I made a mistake."

What? You made a mistake? You're not a prospective student wanting to join our club? If you've come to join the literature club you're in the right place but Nagato is absent today.

"Nope, that's wrong. This is the SOS Brigade right? Then that's where I messed up."

With how quick her responses were coming at me, her voice was sounding like a miniature gun.

"I was originally going to come here but I got off track. Oh yeah! It's nice to meet you Senpai-who's- here! Ha ha, that's alright though. It's not that big of a mistake after all. We'll meet again Senpai, but it's alright if you don't remember me. I could ask which one is which, but both are the same you know. As for me, you can call me Carelessly Careless-san! I am a bit clumsy you know. Please allow me to slip up this time. You'll understand instantly when that time comes even if you don't know the situation now. If for some reason strange evil penetrates this room, please don't panic! Promise me that much. Promise coming…and set! That's alright with you, right? Right?"

Well, I suppose I could accept that if I've got no choice.

I began to think of the possibility that this was a genderbent Koizumi dressed in female clothing, but that's unlikely. It's not Haruhi or Asahina-san. Certainly this isn't Nagato at all. If that's not one of the North High freshmen girls in this room, then I have no idea who it is. What makes matters worse is that one-sided conversation we just had where I'm not sure what I agreed to. It went by so quickly I felt like I was facing one of Edward the Black Prince's longbows. I had no choice; I was completely on the defensive from all of her aggressive replies. That pressure reminds me of someone though…

As I was thinking about things, this girl with the baggy uniform was gone. I flung open the door and cried out "Oi! Wait up!"

But she was one step ahead of me.

"Well that's that Senpai." She turned around and gave a small bow.

"We'll meet again! See ya!"

And so with a gentle smile this girl left the clubroom. I listened but I don't remember hearing any footsteps. She disappeared from the corridor as if she were the morning fog.

"……"

How long did I stand there with a dumbfounded look on my face? Seconds? Minutes?

Finally I pulled myself together and noticed a small mouthed ceramic vase beside the windowsill.

This wasn't here yesterday. Inside the vase was a single flower.

It was a pretty flower that I had never seen before. I'm certain that mysterious girl brought it to the clubroom. Asahina-san wasn't likely to have brought it. But the flower was quickly shuffled out of my mind. Just what was that girl doing here?

That girl acted like she was awfully familiar to me. Just like the first storm of spring, she came, chatted a bit, and then suddenly dispersed. It's just like with Haruhi, Nagato, or Asahina-san: I never have a clear idea of what's going on.

So why did she come here? She couldn't have come inside the clubroom just to place that flower.

Well, wait a second. She really could've been a brigade member candidate. If that's so, she likely came to check out the room.

Still, she was an awfully outgoing type of girl. Perhaps I should've tried to hold her here until Koizumi arrived.

"Oh well…"

After that swift attack, there's no way I could've held her long enough for Koizumi to arrive.

There's still one thing that bothers me.

-*We'll meet again! See ya!*-

What? Where? When am I going to meet this girl again?

"I don't know."

It's just another trouble to add to the mess of the one who infected Nagato: the Sky Canopy Domain's Kuyou, that time travelling bastard Fujiwara, Kyouko Tachibana, and Sasaki. That fake SOS Brigade is at the top of my worries. I'll get around to this strange new character eventually.

I seriously need an assistant. That person can take care of these little things while I go off and deal with the important things entrusted to me. I could ask Koizumi for some help from the Organization, but when crunch time comes they're powerless versus aliens and time-travelers. The same goes for Tsuruya-san.

Kuyou is pretty wicked. Having Kimidori-san and Asakura to oppose her now isn't worthless but, since those two are of different schools in the Integrated Data Thought Entity, I don't have much faith in them. With them at my side, we'd likely be defeated while the enemy sneers and brags "That's why you were meant to lose," at us. That doesn't sound like something I'd want to happen. It makes me sick. You too?

I put my scattered school bag down on the table and sat down in a pipe chair I grabbed.

On top of the table it looked like there was a Shogi piece Koizumi had placed on top.

I sat there thinking about how I don't know the rules of the game when suddenly it was twilight. The order to leave the school, one of the "Silk Road" pieces, was playing.

I was the only one in the SOS Brigade clubroom today. Koizumi didn't stop by. This didn't bode well. I should've started studying instead of doing something like suspicious club activities. Maybe Koizumi was thinking about slowly going down a different path. After all, what's he going to do when he and Haruhi graduate? Does he want to continue keep following Haruhi around? Then it would seem he would want to know her university plans.

Well, before that we have to think about Asahina-san since she's one year ahead of us. Will we get an underclassman who will succeed our sweet upperclassman in serving tea in a maid costume? Would they be a time-traveler too?

"This sucks. Thinking about next year makes me feel like I'm already dead. I can't even laugh about it."

I picked up my lonely bag and left the uninhabited clubroom.

While it's lonely when no one else is there, I wouldn't go as far to put it in something like a rural countryside hospital that was tossed away. It's not that ruined.

This was the first time I was this sentimental since I entered high school. This isn't like me. Maybe if I were a popular high school guy I'd feel this way, but I'm SOS Brigade member number one. I'm supposed to be used to hearing noise and chatter like we're in summer and there's cicadas going off everywhere.

"This sucks."

Those words just escaped my mouth. It felt like someone else had captured my spirit and said them.

That evening I got a call from Sasaki.

"Tomorrow we're to meet in front of the station. This is from Fujiwara-kun."

So it's finally come huh?

Sasaki's voice was somewhat different. It had a decisive pitch to it. The only reason I noticed was due to seeing through her a long time ago.

The decisive battle had finally come and with what better timing? Well actually it's way overdue. It feels like it's been forever since that time at the coffee lounge and not one thing has improved. Well, there are aliens and time-travelers involved. Time doesn't matter to them at all. But we'll finally get a chance to settle everything now.

"Incidentally Kyon," said Sasaki with concern from the bottom of her heart. "It seems like Fujiwara is serious this time. It's a curtain call without a curtain. I think we'll finally finish it this time. He tried to speak in his usual disguising manner, but that's not effective on me. You know I have a talent to see through people."

That's true. I didn't think that Sasaki had been studying human natures all of this time. She's even able to carry such a great lie that Tsuruya-san would have difficulties with it. She probably read through Fujiwara from the moment she first met him.

"But Kyon, they may try to take me out of this situation. Who knows how many times they've attempted to do so in the past? This time I'm an uncertain factor in their equations. But there's one thing we can count on. It's you Kyon. You and your judgment are the key to everything."

"Fufu." I could hear Sasaki's chuckling leaking through the phone.

"It's alright if you don't exert yourself. I have confidence that nothing will happen here. I won't change. You won't change. The world itself will remain as it is now. The only thing that will change is the future. This is likely a big event that concerns both Fujiwara-kun and Asahina-san. We modern people won't have any reason to worry."

I can't tell what Asahina-san (big)'s motivations are. I just know that I don't want to make my Asahina-san cry.

"The future is whatever you want it to be Kyon."

Like a sparrow perched on an electric wire talking about tomorrow's weather, Sasaki continued. "They consider us to be humans of the past but to us they're simply people of the future. Thusly we need to remember what the most important detail is: we're in the present day of this world. That's our number one advantage over time-travelers. Please remember that Kyon. You are able to do something with that knowledge. Then after it's over…"

Sasaki let go of a suppressed giggle.

"Choose either Suzumiya-san or myself to be a normal human. Only you can decide."

I felt as if I was the chosen person of some far off site. But I can't say I'm brimming with self-confidence after hearing that. What is it you're trying to say? Choose between the two of you? I just want to cry.

Nagato, Koizumi, and Asahina-san are all people with special powers I don't have. I've resigned myself to that. I accepted that this past Christmas Eve. Just like fresh tofu, it's profoundly stuck inside of me. But as a result, I had to reluctantly accept the position of cleaning up after Haruhi's unconscious messes. Sasaki, you mean to tell me you want to go through that?

Haruhi's unaware of her powers but you won't be. You'll be perfectly aware that you're some type of god-like being. Please tell me you understand all of this.

Why do you want me to select?

"Fufufufu. Kyon your thickheadness knows no boundaries. Even now you haven't changed from when we were younger." She wasn't mocking me; she was just in amazement. "Think of it as a fable Kyon. If you do that, then anything's alright. Let's say you're about to purchase a lottery ticket,"

I've not bought one, but go on.

"The winning number is drawn and then announced. Think about it, the chances of matching that exact same number are easily in the hundreds of thousands."

In short don't press your luck counting on it to happen.

"The chances aren't good. In order to make a profit, the bookies have to have most people lose. But in this case you know the winning number ahead of time. You need to decide Kyon. Will you stuff it back into the corners of your desk knowing that it'll lose all value and become just a scrap piece of paper? And so that becomes the question. Will you allow it to become worthless?"

That's such a stupid question. Anyone would take the money and run.

"That's true Kyon. So what? You can't help but to tell someone what the number is. Will it be Suzumiya-san or will it be myself? You have to choose one. Thinking like that would allow you to decide. It can't be Fujiwara-kun or Kuyou-san. They're ineligible to win. Everyone else in the world, all time-travelers, and all extraterrestrial beings aren't allowed to win. They don't have the ability to win from you. So Kyon, you're the one to decide it all."

"……"

"Hmm, fufufu. That's a really horrible silence. Coming from you it really is."

Put yourself in my shoes. You're the one who put me in this position.

"But I'm not in that position. However I…You…how should I say it? Ah! That's it. If I could call it anything I believe in you. I have faith that you'll choose the right path to go down. So Kyon, is that even something you can understand?"

Sasaki's fresh tone made her sound like she was in quite a chatty mood. It helped soften my heart. Sasaki didn't call to give me advice or lead me to a decision. This self-styled middle school close friend that Kunikida called a "weird girl" only called to put her exact feelings into words.

"I've got it, Sasaki."

I grasped the phone with all of my strength and spoke.

"I leave it to you. We'll meet tomorrow."

After a moment of silence Sasaki's laughter came through.

"Ah, I hoped you'd say that. My trust in you is as deep as a submarine's lowest depth level. Think as low as you can go and that's the level of trust I've got in you. Later close friend."

Simultaneously without any lag, I hung up and stored that conversation in my memory.

Chapter 8

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It was already Friday.

This past week had been busy and relentless for my soul. From the beginning of Haruhi's new brigade member trials until the moment Yasumi was determined to be the only person allowed into the Brigade, these two weeks have been brutal for my spirit. It seems like it all started when I unexpectedly ran into Sasaki. Then we met up again where she was accompanied by Kyouko Tachibana, the alien from the Sky Canopy Domain, Kuyou Suou, and, in spirit, that other time traveler.

It's somewhat weird though. Despite how quickly we were meeting, we've not seen each other since that last time. I would have figured we were settling into a pattern of events but I suppose nothing can begin if you don't get a reply.

Perhaps it could be something related to Nagato, Koizumi, and Asahina-san's groups that I don't know about. They all share the same goal of keeping Haruhi living a tranquil school life, so maybe those guys were deemed a threat to that. Well, that's one possibility. Would that mean I'm being treated like the outsider that I am? While I'd like to be able to go and help in any way I could, it wouldn't matter if the rest of their group deems me a hazard.

All of this was going through my head as I wiped away my sweat from arriving at the entrance of North High. Mechanically I begin the routine of swapping out my shoes for slippers.

"Huh?"

A surprising object that I hadn't seen in a while was on top of my slippers. Some type of colorful mascot character was printed on the outside of an envelope. The person who it was addressed to was myself. Of course, printed on the other side of the envelope was the name of the sender.

Yasumi Watahashi

As I read her name it jogged my memories. How many times has this scene already played out? First it was Asakura. Her goal was to get rid of me by killing me. Next was Asahina-san. Well, to be precise it was the adult version of Asahina-san. She came with the idea of giving me a big hint for what was next. The following times were also Asahina-san (big).

As all of those memories were coming back, I was starting to consider if this was from another type of time travelers. The time to test this new road had come. I set this analog message in my pocket and started on this well-known path to Arcadia.

I still felt this was different than usual though. The other person was a freshman girl; I have a feeling this cheerful person means no harm to me. Besides, she looks so sweet and innocent she barely looks like a freshman. On the other hand Yasumi was very assertive yesterday when she came to my house though.

"This girl…"

A dream I've had for many years might happen now. It might be a serious love letter from an underclassman girl. Spring might have finally come for me! You were taken at your first sight of me and because of that you were determined to join the SOS Brigade at any costs. You endured all of that for me?

"I'm such an idiot."

As I murmured those words I began to think about how many times a healthy underclassman had a reason like that to come to me. Needless to say I couldn't think of any. Furthermore every time I get a message like this I begin to step unevenly and have these normal-life thoughts. Alright, let's raise our head and head towards this time's crisis. It's happened again.

"Let's go." Reinvigorated, I stood up from the shoe lockers without knowing if anyone had seen me. I'm sure Haruhi or Taniguchi would have been puzzled by my actions. Quickly I one-man stampeded to the restroom and opened the letter. Inside came out a playing card shaped message that had only one thing to say on it.

I hope to meet you in the clubroom at 6 PM this afternoon. Please come alright?

That was it. No harsh comments, no one word replies, nothing like that at all. Damn this is suspicious.

Again the Asakura incident came into my head without warning. But this time my horrible incident warning signal wasn't going off. Nothing at all. My sense of danger might need to undergo some early morning training in the mountains, but this writing appeared to be rivaling Asahina-san (big) in danger-levels. Basically I have some confidence in my ability to warn myself. Can't I get something right once in a while?

Be that as it may I should have this checked out by someone else…right?

And so we moved to the homeroom classroom.

"So, Haruhi."

"What?"

"I'd like your opinion on a problem I can't figure out."

"What?! Is it some type of homework problem?"

"You could say it's something like that."

"Why can't you develop some little passion to learn Kyon? I'd be happy as the Brigade Leader if my members improved themselves like that. All right, have you looked at this problem from a different perspective than yourself?"

"I've done that too."

"Then investigate it! Quickly go look it up!"

"If I had those materials, it wouldn't be a problem would it?"

"Hmm, not arithmetic huh? Then that problem can't be solved in that manner. What formula are you using?"

"Well, it's not math-based at all. Wait, why are you answering as if that's the case?"

"You were copying homework answers from everyone during summer vacation weren't you? Then that means you likely didn't study that subject well."

"Well, not really. But putting that aside, you should think about what the person asking the question is saying before answering."

"Alright then, then it's modern literature. You should really say that earlier Kyon. In this case, you think about what the author's words are trying to say right? Something like that?"

"That's the closest you've come yet."

"What a dumb problem. Regardless if it's short stories, editorials, or even sentences themselves one shouldn't have any problems understanding words. If a person has a problem understanding what an author is saying, then they haven't reached the boundaries of what they know. Assuming I'm right, that person's results would likely be littered with Xs and 0s. They should work on improving the thinking pattern that caused their problem to begin with. I'm able to understand these styles of writings without any problem, right? Then these would be acceptable questions after all."

"Well, you shouldn't go that far into someone else's mind. In this case, the person's style and the person asking are the same one."

"It's like that eh? Instantly solved."

"Please tell me then."

"Alright then," Haruhi came closer to me until she was at the tip of my nose. For a moment I thought I could feel the heat radiating off of her, but that wasn't so. She then let loose a simple comment.

"Then listen to the writer themselves!"

And so at lunch I left Taniguchi and Kunikida eating their lunches to go on a different path. I was going to do as Haruhi said. I was going to find this sender and straighten out this message for myself. Her motives would soon be revealed to me as soon as I find this sender. It could be a confession or it could be the start of a scuffle. Regardless, I was going to find out what it was going to be from this female freshman companion.

And so I wandered around the first year classrooms looking for any sign of Yasumi. It's not that I want to disregard her instructions to meet at 6 PM or that I want to breach this code of manners. It just ended up like this. As much as I trust my intuition, there still exists the possibility that another knifing incident would occur. Just the thought of that might instantly send me to the bathroom.

And so I suddenly stopped walking around.

"What class was she in again?" If I remember correctly she didn't write it on that Brigade trial quiz. I might have been too preoccupied with looking at her name and missed it.

"So it looks like a mistake to look at lunch huh?"

New students were flocking around the corridors that I became so familiar with last year. It was like I was in another world. There were different color slippers and different classes in this hallway now. I'm sure they weren't happy with a strange second-year student gazing around in the classrooms like they were some rare animals.

I began listening to try to hear Yasumi's voice in the various conversations going on in the classrooms. I was hoping to straighten out this misunderstanding. We're in the same club and do the same activities, so this should be alright, but…

"…Where is she?"

Yasumi was nowhere to be found. I had been hoping that her childish appearance would set her apart from everyone else, but that didn't appear to be the case. She could be the kind of person that goes to the cafeteria to eat her lunch, but I soon reached my limit of what I could do. It's not good for someone to loiter around the school during lunchtime without a reason. I looked up at the sky. As I was in the courtyard, my eye accidentally went to the literature clubroom.

What's this? The thought finally hit me. She could have brought her lunch to the clubroom and ate there. Damn it! I could have brought mine and we could have eaten together.

After school, Haruhi usually accompanies me when we walk to the clubroom together and as such we usually find that Nagato is already there. Hell, she's there now. It's her natural position in this school after all. I immediately greeted her with my usual one-hand wave and

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gave up thoughts of going back and getting my lunch. Put it on my tab. After all, this is the one person I should ask about a problem that I don't quite understand.

"……"

As usual she was in the nook of the room reading her book as I came in, just like she is every day. She didn't even move her eyelashes in surprise. Seeing her reading her book in the clubroom during lunchtime gives off such a peaceful and tranquil atmosphere. It's such an ordinary scene that one would be hard pressed to say that she's an alien lifeform.

But that's not what I came here for. I even left my lunch box behind for this. I went and spoke to Nagato.

"Nagato."

"What?"

I took a stab at my first question.

"What kind of person is she?"

"She is nothing."

As to be expected from Nagato. She was able to instantly figure out the main protagonist in my problem. I continued. "Wouldn't you say that's way overdoing it? The person named Yasumi Watahashi is an ordinary student here, right?"

"There is no student by that name at this school."

Alright, that reply got me. Not just mentally, but I physically took a step backwards. She's nothing? What does she mean by that…My head isn't up to this type of multitasking Nagato.

Wait. I see what she meant.

"So it's an alias right? Someone snuck into North High after school with that name to join our club."

"That would be one way you could verbalize that concept."

Good grief. I thought that this "Yasumi Watahashi" was more than what she appeared to be. It was clear from the beginning that she was a weird person. The way she unexpectedly popped in and performed amazingly was nothing short of some hambaked plot from a novel.

So that leaves me with which group she's a member of. The first one that comes to mind would obviously be…

Alien?

"Different."

Time Traveler?

"Different."

Esper…seems unlikely. I don't get that feel from her.

"That would be so. She's neither an esper nor what you would consider a slider."

That's a rather unusual reply from Nagato. For once she preemptively answered what I didn't know and predicted my next question before I could open my mouth.

"So this Yasumi that's been going around in such an uproar, this very suspicious girl, you say she's an unqualified high schooler?"

Nagato moved her head from staring at the internal binding of her book and looked me in the eye for the first time today. Unintentionally, I couldn't help but stare at her eyes that glistened with gold around dark toffees.

I could sense her abdomen moving up and down as her tender voice spoke, "I cannot reply to that question at this instant."

Why? Why is it now that you are refusing to answer as if you're placing those words in some reserve somewhere.

I replied, "Is that of your own volition?"

"What do you mean?"

I backed down by instinct. I couldn't dig too deeply into her reasoning. There are things that she may not be able to say at this time, place, or occasion that I wouldn't understand. But it means that this amusing chatter between us is going to end.

After that surprising incident, there's one more thing I need to know. Can Nagato give her opinion? Especially to myself? Especially when this has a chance of being advance notice of a disastrous situation?

"If I ask you something now, who would be the one to reply? Would it be you or the Integrated Data Thought Entity?"

"If there is a high probability of a positive outcome then it would be myself. However there will be times and cases where my knowledge is restricted to a certain amount."

I know why that is but it doesn't feel like it would be proper to say so. Someday I'll reach my limit and I'll be able to offer some type of revenge for you. Until then I'll be supporting you in any way I can with my hands stuffed in my pockets.

Speaking of which, there's something in there. That love letter (or really an insufficient summons of a message) from Yasumi Watahashi.

"So on this sheet of paper…" I felt awkward showing this summons from Yasumi to Nagato. It felt wrong somehow after what she's done.

Nagato obviously didn't feel the same way. She took one glance and immediately responded. "It will be alright if you proceed."

Really? That's alright then.

"She holds no ire towards you. Rather I would theorize that she would be able to assist you in some manner."

As if by reflex I had to groan. To tell you the truth, I was also heading to that conclusion. This was the disorganized freshman who had cheerfully passed through Haruhi's irrational enrollment trials. The person with the baggy uniform that appeared to overtake her body who fulfilled Haruhi's request of odd jobs around the clubroom with a smile on her face. The girl with such a young face who was always in motion just like her wavy hair. Such were my thoughts about this girl. She would be an ideal underclassman. Maybe I was mistaken about my suspicions around her?

Of course that's forgetting that letter she left in my shoe locker.

After that session where I listened to Nagato's "So"s and "Different"s, I bid her farewell and began on my way back to the classroom. On my way I heard the chime that signaled the end of our break time. Good grief, I had completely missed my chance to eat lunch. I'll just have to take it to the clubroom after school.

Then after our final homeroom I was in a study session with Haruhi who was happy due to our new club member. Haruhi, and myself being dragged along by my shoulder, had vigorously turned the shell of the Literature Club's room into a place she was satisfied with. Gradually I had adopted some of her energy into my routine as well, but with this newcomer my will was starting to waver some.

As usual, Haruhi energetically opened the door of the clubroom. There was the usual maid-uniform-clad figure of Asahina-san and, the person who I'm not sure moved her eyes one millimeter while reading during lunch break, Nagato. Those two plus the only other male (not here yet) Koizumi I don't have to worry about. Just as long as he doesn't have some gigolo act after he's elevated to a class committee member. Though he wouldn't abandon the SOS Brigade,

we shouldn't give off the impression that this is some type of school harem love game. That guy hasn't even shown what he's really like. You could say he's the one person in the Brigade you wouldn't want to see angry.

Wait, someone has slipped my mind already. "Has our new member not arrived yet?"

Yasumi's small figure was nowhere to be found. If she wasn't part of this school then there's no way she'd be there now. However, she should be wary of Our Excellence Haruhi Suzumiya's wrath.

"Ah…" Asahina-san placed her hands together apologetically to everyone. "I'll go ahead and get today's tea ready for everyone. I know how much of an important thing it is to everyone here, so I quickly rushed here after school ended."

My eyebrows couldn't help but twitch. Asahina-san continued with such an excess of emotions and gestures, "I was truly in a rush. Bowing over and over and in such an apologetic mood too. Being absent or leaving early two days in a row is such a bad thing to do! And then while you're apologizing all I can do is stare…Ah, I can't help it…"

Asahina-san blushed and began to hug herself while wiggling back and forth. It appears that she finds Yasumi's appearance to be that cute indeed. "Her eyes look just like those of a cute animal when I look at them! So, so cute!"

While staring at Asahina-san's spoken monologue, I began to think about things. Yasumi's request was to meet here in the clubroom today at 6 PM. Just what is my companion planning? Will we go somewhere in the school building after we meet? Is there something that we can't do while we're in the middle of club activities? She's a mysterious girl, this Yasumi. Quite the mystery indeed.

As I was thinking Haruhi seemed to remember something displeasing, "I heard something from her during lunch today while I was on my way to the cafeteria." Haruhi sat down at the brigade leader's exclusive chair and disorderly placed her bag on the desk. So what did you hear?

"She's taking a break from club activities today. We finally get a new member who isn't such an idiot, one who you fawn over like a mimosa, and she's taking a break. It almost brought me to tears."

So that's why I didn't run into her during lunchtime. This healthy and robust girl was trying to keep a low profile. "Did…Did she give a reason?"

"Ah, Kyon. There was no reason for me to delve that far into her life. If I did that, then I'd be no better than a peeping tom. Besides, she worked so hard to get into the SOS Brigade. It's not like she's going to quit anytime soon. It's sudden, but we all have things we have to do

sometimes. Even though I'm the brigade leader, my principle is to be tolerant with my subordinates."

That's unusual for you to bring up a principle I've not heard before. But since that's the end of our conversation, I sat my bag down by the desk and grabbed my usual steel chair. When I took a glance at the clubroom scenery for the first time, I got an uncomfortable feeling.

There behind the brigade leader's desk near the window was something I hadn't seen before.

While I noticed it Asahina-san spoke in her soft, freshly baked tone, "Maybe we can take this as an apology since Yasumi-san brought this to the clubroom. It was some time ago that she brought it."

Some time ago? Surely we haven't missed it for that long. Oh well, it's all good.

It was a small mouthed ceramic vase. Inside the vase was a single elegant flower.

Haruhi turned her head and looked towards it as well. "I've not seen a flower like this. Hey, you said Yasumi-chan brought this, right?"

"Yes she did." Asahina-san affirmably nodded, "She said that she found it hiding where people hasn't looked in a while and thought it to be interesting. She was near the mountain yesterday looking for it. It's such an unusual looking thing that she brought to decorate the clubroom. It's like she brought a treasure for me."

Yesterday huh? Maybe she was on her way to that mountain when she stopped by my house. It would have been dark when she headed to the mountain afterwards. If she went to Mount Tsuruya (assuming she went to the one in the neighborhood) then there wouldn't be any lights up there while she was looking around by herself. That's quite dangerous for a freshman high school girl.

"Hmm…" Haruhi folded her arms together as she looked at the flower, “Well, that’s alright then. I did ask to bring something interesting. It looks like Yasumi-chan might have done just that. With such a nice follow-up I can tell she’s got the heart of a true SOS Brigade member! She was the only one to make it through my Brigade examination trials, so she’s got to be the real deal. With just a little bit of formatting, I think she’ll be the perfect successor for when we graduate.”

Come on now, how can you tell she’s going to carry out your style of leadership just by passing those tests? She's the only one who was able to withstand Haruhi's demerits and make it until the very end. While it seemed unlikely Haruhi would get her long-awaited new club member, this girl somehow made it through.

But when she got in, Haruhi welcomed her from the bottom of her heart. For many different reasons I'm sure she's become attached to Yasumi. Just take one glance at her and you'd see she thinks that way just by the angle of her eyebrows. Ordinarily I'm perplexed by these types of hints, but I've developed a bit of skill when it comes to knowing things about Haruhi.

Basically Haruhi thinks Yasumi has some potential in her that she's not able to see just yet. Asahina-san thinks there's more to her than meets the eye as well. Honestly, I think there's more too. Reaching into my pocket I'm reminded of her letter. Someone who joins the SOS Brigade just for something like that would be a strange type of person.

Asahina-san seems to be walking on cloud nine as she prepares her tea more vigorously than usual. It seems that having a female underclassmen like Yasumi has really brightened her day. Well to be honest all four of us, that is Haruhi, Nagato, Koizumi, and myself, aren't that great of underclassmen to her. Yeah that's an understatement. She has the violent Haruhi, the silent bookworm Nagato, and the formally polite Koizumi to watch over in this clubroom. As for me, I'm often forgetful that she's a year ahead of me.

But now she has Yasumi with her middle-schoolish face to fawn over. Despite that, this female student who looks two grades younger than reality has such a gentle nature. The next day will come and she'll be happily making tea for all of us again. That stagnant heart of mind gets going when I think about the excitement of seeing her prepare tea for us. I'd love to be able to stare at this SOS Brigade mascot girl forever.

While I was trying to figure out what plant she used to make today's tea I glanced at my watch. It still wasn't Yasumi's requested 6 PM yet. Unfortunately, I hadn't thought of an excuse I could use to go back into the clubroom after activities were finished. Damn. I need to think of one.

"Well hello everyone. I'm sorry for being delayed." And there with a smiling face right out of a commercial for some new acne medication was Koizumi. "I've been troubled many times since the beginning of spring with some small things. Thanks to the head of this year's student council, there's not many people there willing to carry out tasks. While they're not things I'd like to talk about, I can't leave when we're discussing things like the reorganization of the Culture Club."

Koizumi nonchalantly entered the clubroom talking about why he was late, disregarding that no one had asked. He set his bag by the desk and went towards the window, ignoring the Chinese Checkerboard on the table.

"Oh, what do we have here?" You could hear the heart of an adventurer in his voice as he looked at the vase and flower that Yasumi had brought. "And who brought this present?"

"Yasumi-chan did." Haruhi answered while poking her empty tea cup. When she saw that, Asahina-san panicked and rushed to begin preparing more. This time it would be just ordinary tea.

Koizumi put his hand to his jaw and looked somewhat troubled as he gazed at the vase and the flower inside. "Please excuse my actions here." He took out his phone from his blazer pocket and began taking pictures of the flower. I heard many shutter snaps before he finished and appeared to send it to someone.

"You know Koizumi," I began, "Doesn't that flower remind you of the aconite or digitalis species?"

"Not at all." Koizumi slid his phone back into his pocket with a smile of relief on his face. "It is indeed not poisonous. I was a tad bit worried, but I think it is of the orchid family. Oh don't be worried, I was just inquiring about it."

After that, Nagato continued reading her thick two-volumed nonfiction book, Asahina-san continued to serve us tea with flavors I can't quite pinpoint, and Haruhi continued to fiddle with the updated SOS Brigade website. Incidentally, Haruhi had been to so many forums that the browser was riddled with spam and crashed.

So it was up to myself to find some type of free anti-virus and anti-spyware to install on the computer. By the time I had installed it onto the computer some recommendations for travel on the way home from school were being announced over the school speaker.

It was close to around 5 PM now. Nagato closed her book with a snap and stopped reading. That was our signal to begin packing. I was still halfway through creating an alibi that would only be half-acting. First I had to get everyone out of the clubroom or else my meeting with Yasumi would be ruined.

And so we headed to the gate by the side of the school at the top of the hill. This was it. It was now or never for me to pull of this act. It was an abrupt solution to the problem, but nothing else had come into my mind.

"Ah, damn it!" Being the two in front of our group, Haruhi and Asahina-san stopped and looked back. Nagato and Koizumi slowed their pace and caught up to the others.

"I forgot something in the classroom. If I don't go back and get it…Ah!"

It came out somewhat monotonic but then Haruhi replied, "What did you forget? If it's just a textbook I wouldn't worry about it. You should haven't to go back and get it." It's just like it always is. In order for me to go back, I'd have to convince Haruhi that I had to return.

"Well, the thing is," I instantly recited the words I had memorized. "I just remembered that Taniguchi had lent me a porn magazine. I left it inside my desk and forgot all about it."

"Huh?!" said Haruhi as her eyebrows rapidly rose.

"Well, if someone found it I would be in serious trouble. That's why I've got to head back. It's alright for you guys to go on without me. You see, this is a very rare book. It's already prohibited to be sold and out of print as well. If it's seized, then I'd have to do five full body bows in front of Taniguchi in one day for losing it. That's why if I don't go get it, I'd be on bad terms with the guy."

Haruhi had a dumbfounded look on her face. Koizumi had a smirk and Asahina-san looked at me as if I were a puzzle. Finally Nagato just looked at me in the eyes and slightly nodded one micron as if she were giving permission. I feel guilty now. If only I had come up with some other excuse.

"So if you excuse me, I'll be heading back to the classroom. You don't have to wait for me to return. I'll be fine if you head on." I said that over my shoulder as I started back. I was at an almost walking race speed when I heard Haruhi's voice call to me.

"Don't talk about pornographic materials in front of a girl! You're such an idiot Kyon!"

Which girl are you talking about? I'll apologize to Asahina-san tomorrow. I really need to do so.

I could barely see a few other people on the school grounds as it was the time of day where twilight was everywhere. I could've easily missed Yasumi as I headed to the clubroom. I reached there and opened the door.

"Thank you for coming senpai." There, in the clubroom bathed with orange light, was Yasumi waiting for me with a somewhat timid expression. The girl who I searched and couldn't find during lunch break. This mysterious girl who Nagato deducted was not a student of this high school. The "sooo cute" prisoner of Asahina-san who felt like staying after Haruhi's strange trials. New Brigade member number one.

Yasumi looked happy with a roguish grin on her face and a marshmellowly soft smile. "I thought you would come here. I believed that you would come here. Now everything can start."

There was only one thing I could say to such a cryptic message. "What'll happen to me?" That was the first thing that I could say. Isn't this Haruhi's successor until the end or is she that "nothing" that Nagato had said. I knew I should've trusted my intuition earlier. "What's going to happen after this?"

Yasumi replied with some light laughter, "I don't know either."

What?

"But you'll understand very soon." Yasumi gently shook her hair around. I could see her hairpin rock around as she swung. That entire smiling face was visible from that angle.

She continued to stare at me and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. How long that lasted I couldn't tell you.

I heard someone knock at the door.

β-11

It was already Friday.

My enthusiasm had fallen asleep, or it appeared to be at that time.

This morning my sister had calculated the worst way to wake me up and did so with a flying body press. Thanks to that I was forced from my dreams to struggle until I awoke. I had planned to get plenty of sleep so my body would be refreshed, but instead it was still totally exhausted. Since I can't go back to bed, I have a feeling that this is going to continue with all the running around I'm going to do today. At least stop with this practice every day dear sister.

"…Ah…" I raised my halfway idiotic looking eyes and the rest of my top half up from the bed. Because of that, Shamisen, who had been sleeping nearby, had lost his pillow. If he were on top of the futon, he would fall prey to my sister as well. This would not be a case where humanity lost to cats, so I headed downstairs in my pajamas.

Thankfully the weekend was close at hand. Today after school my, as well as the rest of the SOS Brigade's, fate would finally be solved with this occurrence. Even though my brain tissue had woken to half-power, I could at least remember that much.

If I were to go into full serious mode, my head would instantly be awake in a moment if necessary. Thinking about the hilly road up to North High, I would easily compare it to be some early morning exercise routine. It reminds me of when I was in elementary school and we would exercise in the morning and then return for a nap in the afternoon. Oh how I would like to do that, but a break isn't likely now as no hygienic benefits have been discovered for that yet. Why did I apply to such a high school? I would've applied to a city school but my teacher in third year of middle school talked me out of it. I won't let some chant fool me when applying to university.

"Kyon-kun!" My early-to-bed, early-to-rise sister was full of spunk this morning. She looked quite strange when you compared her to the lethargic Shamisen she was carrying in her arms. "Don't you have something important to do today? You said to wake you early didn't you? You told me to ignore you telling me never again. That's what you said."

I don't remember that at all. Today wasn't supposed to be some type of special day for me. There's nothing at school or with the SOS Brigade that I can think of. The only thing I'm doing is meeting with Sasaki and those shady people after school.

"Ah…" I remembered as I took a look at the sixth grader in elementary school and the yawning Shamisen across from me. Last night I had gotten an outline of the plans from Sasaki. Those must have gotten jumbled when I was sleeping.

The final question about Fujiwara: Just why did that time traveler come to the past and meet up with Kuyou Suou and Kyouko Tachibana?

The final question about Kuyou Suou: Why did that extraterrestrial lifeform cause Nagato to be bedridden?

The final question about Kyouko Tachibana, the one behind the abduction of Asahina-san: She holds Koizumi in high regard yet why does she want to make Sasaki into a god?

Those questions were pounding my small brain. But it wasn't limited to those three.

Why had Kimidori-san had been elevated to substitute as an observer of the Sky Canopy Domain for the Integrated Data Thought Entity? Why had the situation never occurred before to temporarily resurrect Ryouko Asakura? Will I ever meet the Asahina-san (big) who had returned to the past many times already? What about Koizumi's power? Also, what would happen to the Tamura brothers, Mori-san, and Arakawa-san?

"I just don't know…" Those worthless words came out in my rough voice. Something was going to happen today. You can count on something big that had never happened before occurring. My biggest concern would be if it would turn out alright. Would I be able to enter the bathtub tonight with just a faint memory of what happened while humming some western tune? Well, that'd be impossible.

It won't stop with this. I'll still be in the clubroom by myself unable to live a normal sophomore school life. Normal life would still be snatched away from me. From that freshman year moment that Haruhi slammed my head into the desk behind me, I've had something messed up in my head. Was it fate? Those words that I had sent towards a star, Haruhi and my wishes both, led up to this encounter.

I don't know what's happened in the past or the future, but I want to protect the current state more than anything else. Given what's happened thus far I'd say that the people of the future and aliens have no common sense. Just sending some type of message would help me get through this. An e-mail or a letter would serve just fine for my needs. Anything that I could refer to would immensely benefit me right now.

But I can’t forget this: everything comes down to me. No matter how intelligent a thesis is proposed nor how wise the genius that wrote it is, it’s all up to me to reject this plan. I have to be as cunning as Koizumi, as reliable as Nagato, and as no-holds-barred as Haruhi.

After all, I’m the number one person who’s been repeatedly resolving these things.

There’s quite a few things I could talk about. If you asked where this self-confidence comes from, it’s from all of the adventures that I’ve been involved in. That’s what happens when you surround yourself with aliens, time travelers, and espers. Incidentally there still hasn’t been a slider yet. People should really pay attention to their surroundings. That’s just a little bit of advice from myself. In the end, it’s all on your shoulders.

And so I walked into the classroom towards my desk as the start of class chime rang. Nothing unusual. In fact the whole day would fit in an “ordinary” category. Due to Nagato’s absence, the person in the seat behind mine was fidgety all day long.

Haruhi just couldn’t stop thinking about Nagato’s poor health like she was waiting for the preview from an anime she had already seen before. All day during classes she was chewing on her mechanical pencil. She would write something that you would need some type of decoder ring to decipher when she was called on by a teacher to the front of the class. She was obviously on another astral plane than usual, but none of our classmates thought any different and ignored her. She was still Haruhi, yet she lacked the good things about her today.

As soon as school ended, she threw some words at me and immediately dashed out of the classroom. Maybe she was off to grab Asahina-san and head to Nagato’s apartment like they were training for a cross-country race.

Nagato was still absent today. When will I be able to see her silently reading form in that nook of the clubroom again? I can’t say. No one else would be the same as her. That’s just the type of relationship we all have with her. I remember that event from last year quite well. You know, that complex and twisting event with myself, Asahina-san, and Nagato? Was that event good or bad for her? Haruhi too seemed different afterwards. Why? I don’t know.

Maybe it was the big baseball tournament? Our trip to the lone island? The summer vacation that went on forever? Our showdown with the computer club? It’s possible that she felt all by herself during our making of the movie. Perhaps it was assisting with the light music club or when I was hospitalized before Christmas. How about the disaster in the snowy mountains or even the literature club vs student council?

Or maybe it was all of that. Before I knew it, the Haruhi of one year ago immensely changed into the Haruhi of today. I’m not talking about her body changing through puberty; I mean that she’s gradually tossing away those rampageous feelings inside. Gradually she’s going step by step with the speed of a Galapagos tortoise towards adulthood. I can see that now.

I grabbed my necktie and pulled down on it with as much energy as I could muster. It was like a whole body of hedgehog needles poked me at once with no real destination.

It was somewhat lonely but things wouldn’t be the same until Nagato is fully recovered. That’s why…

So I began to think. Let’s settle this quickly so Nagato can be released from those idiots. Mixed with whatever I do will be Haruhi giving Nagato the best medicine that could be imagined.

“Hey” I illegally parked my bicycle and met Sasaki, who had come out waving her arm when she saw me. There was that same smile I saw the other day on her cynical and patient face.

It was a Sasaki original that she perfected years ago. As long as she was silent, anyone would think she was cute. Just like Haruhi.

I began to think of how similar those two really are. They both have a strange atmosphere that any guy would be attracted to. They both have this weird nameless power that you just want to experience regardless of gender. Maybe that was how both of them suckered me in like a bug to a trap.

Thanks to Haruhi bringing me to Nagato's Literature Clubroom that day, my eyes look differently at the scenery now. None of my hobbies have changed, but I can't understand why I'm different. I'll entrust the explanation to Koizumi or Kunikida afterwards.

And now the two people surrounding Sasaki both stood up. It was a male and female. One was the short and humble Kyouko Tachibana and the other, who somehow had a look of superiority, would only be Fujiwara. These three people, a self-proclaimed esper, a time traveler, and Sasaki were all waiting for me.

"Kuyou's not here."

She's the one that's causing Nagato's current status. But why is she not here with the others as they stood up?

Seeing my frank expression Sasaki began, "I wasn't able to get in touch with Kuyou-san. That's why she's not here with us. If you'd like to wait for her we can, but I don't know when she'll arrive. If you don't want to wait, that would be fine as well. However if we need her, I'm sure that she'll be there. I guarantee it."

"Is that so?" Fujiwara seemed to take a shot at me. "…Ah."

As always, he had his face set to look down upon everyone else but it was somewhat stiff today. Was this a look inside him? Unlikely to be. More than likely he's nervous about what's going to happen. Downplaying that look he opened his mouth and the usual derisive laugh came out.

"She'll come." Fujiwara took a breath and then uttered, "If it become necessary for her to be there, then she'll be anywhere. It doesn't matter who wishes for her to be there. Hmph, it must be nice for aliens to be that flexible. I don't think I could come and go like she can. Aliens aren't like you past-humans. You're all just like fossilized memories to us in the future. Just worry about when you'll be scrapped."

…Thanks for those hateful words. I can now go along with my intentions without worrying.

“Um…Um…” That came from Kyouko Tachibana, who was looking from the side at Fujiwara and my eyes set to kill. “I’ve arranged a taxi. It’ll be here shortly. Um…Um…Thank you all for coming today.”

Kyouko Tachibana quickly bowed her head up and down. I couldn’t get mad looking at her hair flowing like that. She appears to be something like her organization’s public relations director. Well, is she the most suited person for that?

Well, this is the first time I’ve felt this suspicious in two years. Sasaki’s fine, but the only person here with an enemy marker on them is Fujiwara. Kuyou’s absence relieves me somewhat. Now I don’t have to worry about Asakura reviving here. Well, should I say reviving again?

“Then if you would please follow me, we’ll begin.” Kyouko Tachibana led us like a new clumsy tour guide. She went to the door of the taxi that she likely worked very hard to stop and awkwardly knocked on the side of the door. Much to my surprise, it appeared to be a taxi-for-hire after all. The driver had his face down in an open sports section and was asleep. After hearing her knock how many times, this old geezer opened the rear door and Sasaki, myself, and Fujiwara entered in that order. Kyouko Tachibana took to the passenger seat.

The driver yawned and half-sleepily asked, “Where to?”

“Please take us to this prefecture’s North High School.” When Kyouko Tachibana said that, I found out for the first time where today’s destination was.

“I just left there!” My voice leaked out as our taxi left and began taking our four passengers to the destination. You could’ve just told me that and I would’ve waited at North High for you guys.

“I thought that as well.” That was Fujiwara. “But since this is a complex issue, we didn’t want to interfere with how it’s supposed to be. But that’s just how a 'predetermined event' is. We don’t want to take even the slightest risk with it.”

“That’s too bad,” said Sasaki as she stroked her chin. “'Predetermined event' huh? So basically since it was history that we four took a taxi to North High, we have to fulfill that part?”

“Yeah.” Fujiwara’s reply was quite short. I couldn’t hear any more, but I didn’t want to hear anymore from that face.

Kyouko Tachibana leaned out of the passenger seat. “So you want to accomplish what’s been done? You’re trying to go along with that 'predetermined event' down to the smallest string.”

I looked on as she continued, “Haha, you’re wildly brandishing your time traveler ‘predetermined event’ aren’t you? Then tell me just one thing.”

Before I could open my mouth to interrupt, Fujiwara said something unexpected. “Shut up.” His low toned phrase resounded in my abdomen. It immediately resounded with Kyouko Tachibana. She drew down into the passenger seat as her face reddened.

This heavy atmosphere laid all throughout the taxi. Our driver couldn’t tell the subtleties that were taking place and began making small talk. “So do you young kids go to North High? You’re quite young you know?”

He kept going on as we listened to him speak, “Well, my son is still in elementary school right now. I’m not quite sure he’s my son as he’s studying all the time.”

“Is that so?” As the person in the passenger seat, Kyouko Tachibana likely felt it was her responsibility to carry on in the conversation. Our talkative driver found a partner and continued on with his speech.

…His sixth grade son appears to have taken an interest in the sciences, but that's a difficult subject you know. They've enrolled him in a cram school but he doesn't want to go. They've been able to get one of the neighborhood high school students to come tutor him individually, but his scores haven't improved. It's strange. His son enjoys studying and wants to study, but his tutor has a "let him be" approach. It's quite the troublesome situation for a father…

Kyouko Tachibana had to repeat her "Oh," "Yes," "I see," and "Eh?" replies over and over again. I couldn't tell if it was good luck or bad luck that we just happened to get such a talkative driver. I have to thank her for arranging this driver for us. Now we won't be tired when we reach the high school. I'm curious; is her organization in the same financial situation as Koizumi's? She did ask for a written receipt from the coffee lounge after all. I'd like to ask, but I don't want to impose on the conversation between these two. I'll just forget about listening to them talk.

I asked Fujiwara, who was staring at me like I would attack, "Is this some kind of trap?"

He hesitated, but after a moment of silence he replied, "It's not a trap. It's just something ordinary we've got to do. I don't know why we have to do it though. I just know we have to do this so we made plans and here we are."

But why North High? Where are we going in there? If we go to the Literature Clubroom, no one will be there.

"I'd think so."

Then why must Sasaki be here also?

"Since she's here we can proceed."

What about Kuyou? Wouldn't she be the most helpful person to you guys?

"It doesn't matter if she came. She'll be there when it counts." After that short reply Fujiwara remained still like a wooden statue. It was as if he had planted roots in that seat.

In his place Sasaki began to speak. "This is just my curiosity speaking but would you say that your driving skills need some work Fujiwara-kun?"

He was still silent.

"You've come from the future, so I'm sure you've seen them around this time. If the people of the future haven't used internal combustion engines that have crude oil as their fuel I would think that you wouldn't have driven one before. Am I correct in assuming so?"

Fujiwara's cheek twitched before he replied "If that's the case, how could I say it?"

"I suppose you couldn't."

Sasaki looked very cheerful. "I take a lot of delight in the advancement of science and technology. It's only natural to wish that they develop through the future. We have a lot of problems in this time period. You might wish to come back from your past and fix these foolish ideas. Humanity needs to study, study, and keep on advancing our lifestyles. I think we need a high level of both science and art in order for us to be able to solve our problems. Isn't that right Fujiwara-kun? I don't think you would allow us to advance like we are if you didn't share in that same desire."

"Hope in your dreams. Make your desires come true."

Fujiwara turned a sharp look towards Sasaki. "Such a desire from you all will make the future. Then you too will put your trust in the past. After that…Ha, that's prohibited. Nothing will come out if I try to give you guys some leniency."

And Sasaki was ready to return. "And then what about your 'predetermined event'? You said that you don't know what it's about. Even if you knew what was going to happen, then you couldn't help but go to North High with us. It was already planned for you to go. No matter who you met or what you did, you would still be there. Regardless, you know that it happened in the past and so therefore it was determined that you would be there even though you don't know why. Can you reply to that line of thinking?"

Fujiwara gave a small chuckle. "What else would you expect from her? Again you prove why we chose you as a container. Sasaki, you once again meet our qualifications to contain those powers. Outside of Haruhi Suzumiya, you're the only person in the universe that could do so. You already know it yourself. Will you let that chance slip by?"

Sasaki gave Fujiwara a scowl as she looked away from the time traveler as if it didn't concern her at all. Once again I noticed that the atmosphere had gone sour.

"What's this 'container'? This is the first I've heard of such a thing."

"You'll understand soon." Again Fujiwara gave a curt reply to me. "Originally you were quite useless to us, but we couldn't go against the 'predetermined event'. I couldn't ignore the smallest detail so therefore I summoned you. You're just a normal human of the past so just enjoy your place as a bystander."

Don't dare look down on me like that. Divine punishment is what awaits you.

"Yo Fujiwara. Is it your plan to change the future by using me?"

Silence.

"If we were to try, wouldn't it be futile?"

I'm reminded of the conversation I had with Asahina-san on our search "date".

"Time is like a flipbook right? If you came from the future to intervene wouldn't the best you could do would be a prank on one page? It wouldn't have any relation to the future wouldn't it?"

Silence.

"Honestly you knew this ahead of time so you tried to use your knowledge of that 'predetermined event' didn't you? That's why you returned to this time period, right?"

"Shut it." His sharp voice pierced my ears. Incidentally I kept my urge to kill hidden in my eyes. "Shut it and listen past human. Any more irresponsible remarks and I'll *classified* my *classified* on you!"

His voice was so cold it'd make you shiver. This guy was serious. I had triggered a land mine within him. It was enough to get my frozen heart rising.

Sasaki nonchalantly tugged at my sleeve slightly. Maybe she was saying silently to give it up until we're at Fujiwara's base. Thanks for telling me Sasaki.

Was the driver listening to our three-person conversation in the backseat? Maybe he was deathly afraid of interrupting us?

He was overlooking us in favor of having his one-sided conversation with Kyouko Tachibana in the passenger seat.

While I sympathize with you Kyouko Tachibana, you're still an enemy to the SOS Brigade. Thanks aren't likely going to happen from me as long as you continue your path against us. Even more, the threat towards Sasaki from Kyouko Tachibana is quite high. Sasaki's smart,

clever, and has a great eye for people. I trust her immensely. I don't think it's possible for something to turn into a bad situation when Sasaki's around.

That I believe in.

The taxi stopped outside the gate to North High and opened the back doors. Kyouko Tachibana paid the driver. "Ah, please remember to give me a receipt."

While I was listening to her reserved voice, I began to think. This would be the second time I stood in front of these iron gates today. The sky was becoming dim but I could still hear the voices coming from the sport clubs as they finished for the day.

"Come on. Let's get going."

Fujiwara acted as our vanguard and began walking inside the school. The timid Kyouko Tachibana also began to place her feet inside the campus of another school. I continued as I normally did since I was familiar with this school. A few moments later I looked up and immediately stopped.

"What…What…What is this?" Both my eyes and my mouth were wide open. Nothing could come out of my mouth.

The sky…

It had become a clear sepia color with cream pitched in. The Venus that was shining brightly a few seconds ago had disappeared into this impossible phenomenon. It gave off a soft and sweet feeling. Quietly shining on all of nature with its lighting.

But I know this color. When Sasaki had called me to the coffee shop Kyouko Tachibana had brought me to this world.

No one inside. Nothing else around us. It's the exact opposite of Haruhi's closed space…

Throwing away any and all reflexes I had, I turned back to where we came from.

It was useless. I had assumed that the taxi went down the hill right after we left. But Sasaki wasn't there and neither was the taxi. We were only separated by about ten centimeters between the gate, but now we're in entirely different worlds.

I stood up in this entirely silent world. The voices I heard a little while ago from the sport clubs had vanished. So too were the chirping of the birds and the sound of the wind from the mountain. Not a single sound appeared in this world. In my eyes there was one constant: the sepia was reflected from the school building right into my eyes.

Instantly I dashed away towards the school gates and ran into something squishy.

"This is…" It was the same as when Haruhi had locked us inside the school grounds. A soft wall was preventing us from leaving. This could only mean one thing: I couldn't escape now.

"Have you finished yet?" Fujiwara's voice came from behind me. "We're already here. This isn't your world. Reality and common sense don't apply here."

In front of me was Fujiwara's scowling face. Across from that was the worrying shape of Kyouko Tachibana. How I wish I could give this time traveling bastard a Shoryuken[11]. It's because of him that my self control has leveled up three times.

"Don't you want to thank me with all of your heart?"

"…It was a trap." I moaned with all of my might. "This isn't over yet!"

Fujiwara evaded my statement. I turned my back from him. "We're still not at the final destination. Why don't we get a move on? There we can settle this for our future."

I could barely see Fujiwara warp his lips as he said, "We wouldn't have been able to proceed if it weren't for Sasaki. She was the one who led you here. And to think she was helping us all along without even knowing it. Ah, don't get mad man. We're through with her after this. She'll be free to go. She'll be able to come and go as she pleases."

A critical strike. My determination continued to rise at this time. As if he predicted this would happen Fujiwara continued, "Let's get going."

To where? We're inside closed space. Just where in the hell do you plan to take us?

"Where do you usually go in here?" Fujiwara's face looked up. "We're going right to your base. Our destination is that small depressing room."

His eyes were looking straight at the Literature clubroom in a way I wasn't able to recognize. But why there? Out of everywhere we could go, why there?

"Think about it. You'll figure it out sometime." I could hear Fujiwara's voice close to me. "In that room is everything. All sorts of powers have combined in there, especially the one that will allow me to change the future. In there is every possibility as well as the possibility to stop anything. Both progress and stagnation are holed up together in there. Well, one would guess even the dead might exist as well."

So that's it. I finally got why here. But why is it in our clubroom? This was just a room that housed a club that was on the edge of extinction. That's why Haruhi had her eye on it. It was the final destination after the world changing events near Christmas. That's where the bookmark

[11] A spiraling punch moving in an upward arc.

that slipped out was. The old computer. The enter key. How I was able to go back to that summer. Tanabana.

Koizumi had told this me once before. That room had long since changed from what it used to be. Various groups and powers were battling it out to cancel any and all effects. Due to that, it's just an ordinary room. Thank goodness for saturation sometimes. Are we really going in there?

"Tachibana." I finally remembered the other companion we had.

"Um…yes?"

"Do you know why I was brought along to here?"

"…No, I'm…" It was an honest reply that she didn't know. She was the same as myself: here trying to figure out what was going on. It wasn't hot at all, but a bead of sweat dripped down my forehead. For no meaning I fanned my head while trying to read what's happening.

This means this is all Fujiwara's doing. Somewhere around here is likely Kuyou. Fujiwara strode into the school building as if he was heading down the shortest path in an RPG. He headed towards the glass doors and past the shoe lockers without stopping. For some reason anger swelled up inside me towards him.

I'm sure this school is cursing him quite loudly. We had come a long way from the station to this old school building but I guess we're near the end. It was without any air conditioning or heating so the summers were hot and the winters cold. If I had to think of any positives I'd say that the mountains were close by and the plants were well groomed. Regardless, it is still my alma mater.

It's the place where Haruhi, Asahina-san, Nagato, Koizumi, Taniguchi, Kunikida ,and myself spend most of our time. I can't say it was peaceful watching as others intruded onto this school. And to make matters worse it was my rival Fujiwara. Why must I have to act as a subordinate to this guy? Just thinking about it sends my anger to a new record high.

The worst part is that everything he's said has been right. I didn't know what I had gotten myself into. Being able to throw unreasonable questions at him would help me greatly, but it seems that I can't do that. I didn't know what Fujiwara was trying to do at all. I've got no choice but to spring his trap.

This is Sasaki's closed space. Koizumi can't help me now. Nagato is bedridden. Haruhi and Asahina-san are at her side and would be impossible to expect them to leave her side and appear here. But the worst is Sasaki. She made this closed space yet she can't even touch it. If she could, she would have done so in the coffee shop.

Fujiwara, Kyouko Tachibana, and myself were the only three members that were present in Sasaki's closed space. It looks like Kuyou Suou wasn't one of the included ingredients. But just because I haven't seen her doesn't mean she's not there. That's just my perception from being surrounded by supernatural phenomenon all this time. I'm sure she'll come out right at the perfect time surrounded by this thin pale light.

In brief, I was surround by my enemies with no way to see a way out.

Fujiwara turned his head and gave a discerning look towards my vanquished self. "So, let's go inside. Would you like to cover your eyes or ears as we head inside? It's alright if it's too much of a burden for you. Consider it your free piece of advice."

"Shut it." Let's head inside to our room. Don't look down on the Literature Club and the SOS Brigade clubroom. This is our everyday space. This is where we always end up going to. If she's inside, maybe Nagato has hidden the key. Maybe some other weird phenomenon is about to happen…

Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana set out inside the school. It was inconsequential if I followed them.

What crap is this? I'm just going to be discarded like this in our clubroom?! This is where Haruhi, Nagato, Asahina-san, Koizumi and I return to. Other people can't lead their way into that room!

I had to laugh as that willpower pulled me up. I started after those two.

Chapter 9

α-12

After a short time, someone knocked at the clubroom door. It's likely someone rude and who has no sense of personal manners. Instinctively, Yasumi looked towards it. This mysterious first year student who acts like a construction worker immediately getting to work after learning the plans and who always has this mysterious smile…who is she? It's like I know her somehow. Have I seen her in a dream and somehow called for her to appear? She's just asking for me to suspect her.

A reply from the other side and the twisting of the knob sounded. The door opened and instantly my mouth fell.

Light shown in from the other side of the clubroom window as the setting sun fell upon three figures. The likelihood of Haruhi, Asahina-san, and Koizumi returning instantly vanished. I knew who these three people were, but I couldn't tell what had happened to bring them here. Due to the surprising nature of this supernatural appearance of these people my mouth had been struck by aphasia.

"Wha…?"

I couldn't even finish saying that. My mouth was aghast, but my body was still. It was like looking into a mirror when these three simpletons entered. I watched their faces. Thank goodness I wasn't gargling like usual when looking into a mirror. Because…

β-12

Because Fujiwara had wanted to, we were outside the Literature clubroom. I had a premonition it was empty. Since we're in Sasaki-made closed space, that's highly probable. It doesn't resemble it though. We're here because Fujiwara asked the nearby Kyouko Tachibana to bring us here. Even if one of them is lying about their motive, I won't worry because I have allies near this place. All I have to do is imprison them in this clubroom.

Fujiwara looks at me as he rudely knocks on the door. The people inside must think we have incredibly poor manners.

Without waiting for a reply, Fujiwara carelessly grips the doorknob, turns it around and throws the door open.

Thanks to the setting sun, light comes through the window of the clubroom. No doubt, there will be some shadows. However, there are two people inside. Though they are somewhat silhouette-like, you can plainly see a male and female North High uniform.

…But…However…

"Huh…?"

I can clearly hear a sound coming from both sides in stereo.

"What is this…?" That squeezed to death voice is Fujiwara.

"What's going on…?" And that's the docile surprised Kyouko Tachibana. Up until now, I've not asked, but their voices clearly show their emotion.

Fujiwara speaks, "Where's Kuyou Suou? Who are you? Well, rather who are you to break in here?!"

If I had to say, something had happened. If Suou's here, where is she? Was this the plan of Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana? I put up my hand to shade the setting sun. Fujiwara pushes me aside and steps inside.

Wait. Setting sun? In the past, all light has been dim when I've entered closed space. Somehow a great banquet of light from a setting sun has appeared? Orange light seeps through the glass window of the clubroom. Isn't it strange to only occur in this clubroom?

However, I lost the urge to answer that when I saw the faces of the two people inside. Because there was…

α-13

The sudden abrupt entry of the three people had also caused them to lose their voice. This three varieties of dumbfoundness on the faces of this clique of three people were clearly evident.

"What is this?"

"What's going on?"

The voices emit as if they were set in a poorly made stereo tone. That unknown time traveler is over there. Earlier in February of this year, Asahina-san (Michiru) and I met this detestable fellow before Asahina-san (Michiru) was kidnapped in a van like it was illusion from a magic show. Senility wouldn't let me forget this bastard's face.

And this would be the third time I met the female of the trio. She introduced herself as Kyouko Tachibana. She's from a different esper group from Koizumi who were behind the kidnapping of Asahina-san (Michiru). Also she seems to be a friend of my old classmate Sasaki. Secondly we met right before the SOS Brigade met at our usual gathering place. At that time, the time traveling bastard wasn't there; instead there was a strange-haired alien. However, I don't see her here. My desire to see her is the same as my desire to have mites in my futon. That's a no. But this isn't good.

"…Who, who are you?"

Once again it was said. This time, it was in said with perfect timing by two people. One would conjure that it was the same tone, language, and voice. There's not even a little difference in timing. It would be called a perfect union in stereo from the exact same voice. The room trembled.

The visitor before Yasumi and myself entered the room.

It was me. Or rather I should say it was another me. Both myself and <me> looked at each other with an astonished look on our face.

β-13

It was me.

"Who, who are you?"

I had lost all sense of being able to speak. It was if I had been in a time slip and stepped into a space where I was.

Up until now I had been to and from the past many times I think. But as for Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana, they had been frozen as if they were statues made by a very talented craftsman. I'm sure this must be the case of that time traveler Fujiwara.

Wait. In that case, wouldn't this be strange? If I had went to the past, I would have a memory of meeting myself before. But I don't have one. This would mean that I have been taken to meet the future me. I think that if I were to meet myself in the past, I'd not take this for granted. Especially when, frankly, I'm face-to-face with me.

But, this <me>'s reaction is strange. If this <me> is from the future, I don't think I'd have such a strange look on my face when I would be in the past. That's right! When Haruhi disappeared, Nagato, Asahina-san, and myself went back in time to save the buggy Nagato. If we take that into consideration and that <me> is really a time traveler, then wouldn't that solve it? That <me> would have to be in disguise.

"Ah…" And then <me> spoke. When that voice came aloud, it seems as if my thinking process had occurred at the same time as <his>. It looks like neither of us is from the past or the future. That means this is removed from time-related matters. This is a new phenomenon.

While I was thinking, I finally noticed the girl alongside <me>. Who is she? She's small and has her too-big uniform looking unkempt. On her hair was a smiley face ornament. Wait, where have I seen…

I looked behind them onto Haruhi's Brigade Leader desk. Sitting there was a flower. It all ties together. This world and the world I lived in up until now weren't different. However, separated from time and if we take into effect time plane changes, this is possible.

"Fufu…" Despite the state of events, this girl still gives that soft smile and won't give up. The perfect intruder. Who is this strange girl? Does this other <me> know?

α-14

I couldn't take my eyes off <me>. This person is me. Really it's me. Not from the past or the future and not looking a bit different, it's exactly me. The other me must've come to the same conclusion. He must've fallen into this same surprising and doubting double spiral, just like me.

And then, let's think. Hmm…how did <me> get here? Furthermore, like this? With me, and another me, what would Yasumi be thinking? You could tell that's approximately <me> with a single glance. Especially with me myself here to compare.

This joke of a stalemate continues. Everyone is surprised; all of nameless time traveler, Kyouko Tachibana, and <me>. Well, except for our normal person here.

"Senpai"

Yasumi looks straight towards me and <me> with that childlike smile on her face. Once again she laughs.

"Yasumi." My voice is weak and dry.

"You, who are you?"

"Fufu…" laughs Yasumi like a child. She stands up, takes my hand before I can react. Then she pulls me and extends my hand to the other <me>. <Me> takes a breath and prepares, but Yasumi is too quick and extends my arm forward. It was as if it was spontaneous. With a jerk, Yasumi pushes <me> and myself together.

Then, "I'm Watahashi"

And after saying that, my and <my> hands connect. Now, I finally understand everything.

β-14

It was as if everyone had hardened and time stopped. The only one to move was that strange girl.

"Senpai" The young girl with a childish face looked straight at <me> and myself. Then she laughed.

"Yasumi." <My> voice sounded as if I had swallowed some drying agent.

"You, who are you?" It seemed as if the other me knew the identity and personality of this strange girl.

With a "fufu" this "Yasumi" continued laughing with her child-like face. After standing up for a while, she grabs <my> hand. I had the same reaction as <me> as if she would grab my arm and extend it out. Come on now, be kind.

With hearing such a voice, I'm only able to feel warm emotions.

As if I'm preparing myself, I inhale deeply, but this North High Student Yasumi grabs my hand before I can prepare. The warm soft feeling of her fingers is familiar. I know I've felt this before somewhere. With a jerk, Yasumi pushes <me> and myself together.

Then, "I'm Watahashi"

And after saying that, my and <my> hands connect. Now, I finally understand everything.

Final Chapter

"Wha!?"

I didn't even know which "me" that came from. Most likely from both since it seemed to be at the same time. But what reached my ears wasn't a unison nor a duo. Rather, it was a voice let loose from the body of a single human.

Right after that, a rapid stream of awful memories began invading my head. Someone's indescribable memories, like a tasteless foreign substance. I closed my eyes and crouched down. I reflexively covered my ears because my instinct was yelling at me to not take in anymore outside information.

"Uhh…"

The utter confusion of time travelling with Asahina-san and the others churned my brain. A scene I didn't know, an action I didn't know, a situation I didn't know, a history I didn't know…those things descended upon me and became a scene, action, situation, and history I do know. Like a taiji drawing, a vortex swirled about, coiling around me, and flinging me right into its spinning center. As if an acceleration device was being used on one of those revolving lanterns, various flashbacks rushed in behind my tightly closed eyelids.

-----All of the SOS Brigade coming to nurse the collapsed Nagato-----the anger I emitted when reprimanding Kuyou, Asakura's revival, and the mediation from Kimidori-san-----meeting with Sasaki, Tachibana, Fujiwara, and Kuyou numerous times-----being taken to Sasaki's twilight Closed Space by Tachibana-----receiving an extracurricular lesson from Haruhi after school-----the club entrance exam Haruhi was pushing that disqualified new club candidates with its one-sidedness-----Yasumi Watahashi, the only one able to pass-----Yasumi, who received guidance from Asahina-san on how to make tea bitter and fumbled around on the web site at the clubroom-----when she discovered the "MIKURU" folder and wrote on the paper airplane-----the vase she had to hold a single flower-----a mysterious flower.

I wasn't wrong about any of it. These were my memories without discrepancy or contradiction.

What the heck is this?

The new school term and Haruhi, affected by the feeling of spring, gathering club members. Nobody coming to the clubroom. The clubroom flooded with new members. The phone call I received while taking a bath. The caller was-----

This is where it gets different.

I know it was Yasumi Watahashi now, but at that time it was a voice I had no memory of ever hearing before. Sasaki's phone call was a serious matter for myself and the SOS Brigade.

That time. From that time on, the world was definitely divided into two.

That thoughtless club member exam and the serious societal lecture; the chronological order of the latter had me seriously worried. Sasaki's bright Closed Space and Kuyou Suou "cosmic horror" reaction. And incidentally, Asakura's revival and Kimidori-san's "serious mode"…

The one successful applicant, the new club member Yasumi Watahashi, with her strange positive attitude. Nagato's lack of reaction and Koizumi's vague remark…

There were two kinds of memories of that one week coexisting within me. Just what the hell is this? It's not a matter of which one is true and which one is false.

Both are memories that had become a true reality. I could only imagine that they were in the same chronology and I myself had divided them and spent time in each. That's because neither of the two memories felt out of place. It's not like I have absolute confidence in my recollecting abilities, but if we're talking personal experience, that's a different story. The one common thing wasn't just who the owner of the phone call I received in the bath was—Yasumi or Sasaki—it was after that when things got completely different.

From that time until now, I was leading two different lives. I can only think of it like that. And then, those two memories became the present, trying to fuse together with all the quickness of moving particles in a wave. I was at my wits end, being attacked by illusions with the sound of crackling nerve synapses.

"Guh…guh…"

I didn't feel like I had a headache or wanted to throw up from intoxication, but would it be fitting to say that the feeling of these unexplainable and speedily rotating memories became just like the taiji drawing? Its revolving black and white comma-shaped beads made me unable to see anything but gray. The pattern of the two different foreign colors was successfully becoming one. The grayness continued and the rotating kept going.

"Mm…fu…u" I fortified my body like a hermit crab, and finally that intracranial typhoon passed. I still felt confused but I recovered enough to open my eyes and ears. With my hands still on the brigade chief's desk, I was at least able to coax my legs bit by bit into standing up. Since it was dim, I barely had the energy to focus my attention on the contents of the clubroom. That's when I realized it.

I was alone now. The other <me> who had been here until now had gone off somewhere. But why didn't I find it odd? Why was it again? There's really a simple reason for that. 1+1 is

certainly 2. But I knew that there are times where that's not the case. For example, if you mix one sand hill with another sand hill, you get one bigger sand hill.

A more appropriate way of calculating addition right now would be none other than multiplication. 1x2—the answer to that is something even an elementary school kid would know. That is to say, it's 2.

The other <me> has disappeared. And in <his> stead, I have two people's memories inside me.

During several days of one memory, Nagato is well, Haruhi is having fun with the new club member exam, and Yasumi appears. Meanwhile, in several days of the other, Nagato is lying sick in bed, I have a talk with Sasaki's group, I'm attacked by Kuyou, and Asakura is revived. These two sets of memories were left perfectly lined up in my head.

What's more, they totally don't feel out of place at all. I understood it well, but on the other hand, I didn't understand why. If you're living together with two different memories, it's natural to be confused.

That's not true.

Yasumi's cheerful voice answered me. Just her voice.

They're both you, Senpai. It's not that one is real and one is fake. It's just that the history is a little different, but it's the same time and same world.

I shifted my attention down to where the voice was coming from.

She wasn't there.

Yasumi Watahashi had disappeared. Like the smoke from a burned out sparkler, the other <me> completely disappeared in a similar way, as if he was never here to begin with.

Where did he disappear to? I was then immediately able to understand how he was related to me. It's assimilation.

According to Yasumi, the moment myself and the other <me> touched hands, we became the very same person from that time on. It's simple, right? We had the same personality from the beginning because we were one human being. Because of some circumstance for it, or possibly someone's anticipation of it, we didn't pass through the temporary division.

Therefore, we just went back to how we were.

But what about Yasumi? Why was Yasumi able to do such a thing? And where did she go? The window and door had remained shut. To disappear from a locked room right in front of me…was she a teleporter? Or perhaps an illusion?

If that's the case however, what I can't explain is why I sensed that I would see Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana in addition to Yasumi. As for something totally irregular, his expression of surprise was definitely not fake. In fact, it looked like the other me being there in the club room was another unexpected phenomena to him. Of course, Fujiwara rarely shows his feelings openly.

"You broke through the regulations…? Impossible. To think that there was someone who could undo the prohibition before I could…? Just who are you…?"

With an uneasy voice mixed with anger and embarrassment he continued, "You say I'm some kind of unscheduled abnormality? I don't think I heard you. Whose device was it again? Who was it that called her here?"

He kicked the floor in irritation. "Damn it, this wasn't in my plan. Where's Kuyou? What happened to her?"

Thunder roared. The tiny window of the clubroom lit up with a flash that cast shadows of everyone present. The sudden lightning that fell from the sky brought with it an indescribable color hue. I instinctively shifted my gaze outside. As I looked at the unbelievable scenery before me, I groaned, "What's with this weather…?"

The heavens were whirling about. In the pale, glowing, cream-colored sky, a dark light of blue-ashen colors intermingled as if a cluster of galaxies was colliding, painting a bizarre scene. Here and there, pale bright light and dim, dark gray tentacles wriggled about, as if scrambling to find their point of influence. Like colors dissolved in a container of Indian ink, a crazy artist was moving his brush around without restraint.

Everything in the world cut off by the rectangular window was being completely submerged by the two colors—the grass in the courtyard, the towering school building, the passageway, all the leaves of the cherry blossom trees…everything.

I still remember this world tinted by this array of light colors. It's a Closed Space that Sasaki unconsciously creates. As if competing against that Space, the other color was squirming about. Of course, I remember it too. The Closed Space that Haruhi creates.

Sasaki and Haruhi are having mutual hostilities right here and now. Why? Up until some time ago, I understood that there existed a world together with Sasaki. The reason Kyouko Tachibana suddenly came to North High was to take me inside of it. But why is Haruhi's Closed Space occurring? Haruhi should be at Nagato's apartment now…no wait, is she on her way home from school? Damn, I don't know. But what I really don't know is why lines were flickering like geometric patterns all over the vicinity of the world that lay before my eyes. I remember this. It looks a lot like the data operation Space that Asakura created.

What happened to the world I was in before? Is all this weirdness being processed and mixed together? What is it? Just what the hell is this?

"-----This is the beginning. Of every possible crossroad…"

A melancholic voice reached my ears. I lifted my head and before my eyes stood a figure dressed in an all-black blazer with strange ebony hair down to her knees.

More expressionless than a plaster figure from the Roman era, Kuyou Suou stood between Fujiwara and Kyouko Tachibana. There was no feeling in her eyes, but when her pale lips moved slightly, the air shook.

"-----The past, the future, and even the present cannot exist here. Matter, quantum, waves, also willpower. The realization of reality. The future becomes the past, the past becomes the present…"

There was no point in being surprised at Kuyou's sudden appearance now. But she should at least act like she's breathing.

Before I could raise a complaint however, "Did you betray me?" As Fujiwara was saying this, he faced Kuyou with the eyes of a carnivorous animal watching its sworn enemy. Kuyou flashed a smile. The emotions of these alien agents change so abruptly, nobody ever knows how to respond.

"No, I came here. That is the answer."

"If that's so, then what is this? The world is totally—" Fujiwara, stopping in mid-sentence, suddenly became stiff, as if receiving some kind of divination. In a strained voice he said, "So that's it. How ridiculous. It's already diverged, huh? Just who—"

With timing as if to allow Fujiwara to add a comma to his line, there was a crackle sound. The clubroom door suddenly opened.

"Hello there." Together with that easygoing smile he always has after school, he greeted me with one hand, then winked at me. As I was able to see his figure, my reaction was to be expected.

"Koizumi!?"

"Yes, as you said, Itsuki Koizumi in the flesh, though I wanted to make a more dramatic entrance. For example coming in by breaking through the window. But I didn't have time to honestly consider that option."

I no longer wanted to use the character for "amazement" as the first word to come out at that moment. Now this would be the second one, "surprise." Having said that, I don't know what expression to use anymore.

With large strides, Itsuki Koizumi came into the room and glanced at myself, Fujiwara, and Kuyou, as if trying to confirm we're all here. Lastly, he brought his gaze to Kyouko Tachibana and looked at her like one would look at their younger sister.

Kyouko Tachibana, who was being directly looked at by Koizumi, said with more astonishment than even I had, "It can't be." Then in a more excited, shaky voice, "This is Sasaki-san's Closed Space. Koizumi-kun, there's no way you should be able to enter here!"

He responded like an honor student who got an X on an answer sheet that was actually correct, "I'm sorry to say this but…" Koizumi gave an exaggerated bow as if on stage. "Within this school, the closed world that you people created is supposed to exist, but that's not the case. Please look outside."

There's no point in looking. I had already been noticing the scenery mixed with gray and sepia colors some time ago. A world where Haruhi's and Sasaki's Closed Spaces are mixing together…an indescribable world I'm watching unfold before me.

Of course, Kyouko Tachibana noticed it too. "It just can't be. Because Suzumiya-san isn't…"

As she started talking, Kyouko Tachibana gazed at the empty sky. Like a deer sensing the footsteps of a hunter, she was scared.

"That girl from before…so that's what it was…" Her tone of voice made it seem like she understood something. But what was it? Why is it that everything these guys get I don't get? Speaking of which, although I was trying not to seem like I was troubled by the confusion at hand, I had to manifest all of my emotional strength. Because to make matters worse, as the current situation became clear, my emotional strength was still being assaulted by trials.

Koizumi wasn't the only sudden visitor. As I witnessed the tall figure of a person come out from behind the assistant brigade chief, I felt like I was unable to stand. I wasn't upset at the nerve she had to appear. It's just that I couldn't help but think without falling to my knees that she possesses strong legs that were a natural fit for commuting to school on that hill every day. When I first entered this school, I was grateful to the rigorous commuting that hill brought…is what I want to say, but no. Once more I'll say that at that moment, my brain was on the verge of exploding because the range of my circumference meter was processing such an image with all its might. And so, in regards to that person's entrance, it was natural for my head and mouth to stop spinning.

"Hello, Kyon-kun."

With a white blouse and a tight skirt trying to hide her super-glamorous body, stood the blooming beauty who has helped me out countless times. As if cosplaying with the temperament of a school teacher, the smile full of affection turned to me.

"Asahina-san, why are you here…?" As if trying my best to squeeze out that line, my expression was increasing like something was blocking my head off. But honestly, it was useless to ask about it. Asahina-san, adult version. Asahina-san (big) to me. My impression of a grown-up Asahina-san.

The genuine time traveler suddenly stepped forward from Koizumi's shadow.

"Koizumi-kun brought me here. He has the ability to penetrate Closed Space. You knew that too, didn't you?"

My memory of Koizumi leading me by the hand into the Closed Space of town crossed my mind. If we're talking about the realm of Closed Space, I've experienced it once with Koizumi and once with Haruhi.

"I really wanted to have all the clean-up implements ready as soon as I arrived but…the space-time continuum cannot penetrate here."

While speaking in that playful manner, Asahina-san (big) stuck out her tongue a bit. As usual, I'm infatuated with her intimate demeanor. When I met with her numerous times during Tanabata four years ago, her young, unchanging body was charmingly beautiful—a voluptuous body that was muddled up a bit…

At that moment, while my mind was off somewhere having hallucinations of revolving lanterns, the assistant brigade chief from the squadron of high school esper boys looked quite satisfied as he addressed the person across from him.

"It is an honor to finally meet you, Asahina-san's original form. Above all, you look quite well here in the past, too. It seems like you don't have as many restrictions right now as far as treating things as classified."

"That's not exactly true. I was informed from the start about a special classified secret of the largest grade. I'm also one piece of it."

I recognized those lines only a bit, so comprehending them seemed like it would take an infinite amount of time. What is it…what is it…I just don't understand. Asahina-san (big) is controlling Asahina-san (small), and what's more, is there someone else moving her around like a game piece? What kind of person would that be? Is there someone above Asahina-san (big)? Asahina-san (special class)? No, this isn't the time to be thinking about that.

"Hey, Koizumi," I said exultingly. "Which Koizumi are you?"

With his usual way of acting, he extended both hands. That overacting behavior of his like he just accepts everything is actually his strong point. "Both. I've also been fused with the 'me' from back then. To give it a name, it would be the α side."

α? What the heck kind of code is that?

"Forgive me, it's only a code for convenience's sake. It's the same for you, too. Those of us in the SOS Brigade should have two sets of memories. In the first, a carefree history of being busy with the exam for new club members. And in the other, a history where Nagato-san is bedridden and the SOS Brigade falls into substantial dysfunction. I think it's necessary to distinguish the two, so I've decided to call the former 'α' and the latter 'β.' Do you have an objection to that?"

Hey, c'mon now. A, B, N…use whatever you want since it seems like they've become one now.

Koizumi looked at Fujiwara, Tachibana, and Kuyou in turn and cleared his throat. "It appears that what these people were expecting has been thrown off track. That's true, isn't it? It's troubling for you to take us lightly like that. You people still don't understand Haruhi Suzumiya-san. Of course, you've put plenty of devotion into this, so I assume you have a backup plan? If not, then you shouldn't be carrying out such bold tactics. But Suzumiya-san, our awe-inspiring brigade chief, an odd time traveler, an ill-prepared esper organization, interfaces who came to Earth from a superficial time, you cannot outsmart them all. She may not be a god, but it's possible that she's a being who holds the powers of one. An irregular human being unable to be analyzed."

Koizumi felt around in the pockets of his uniform and took out some fancy stationary. "This is something that was in my shoe locker this morning. Shall I read it?"

I took on the role of representative for everyone in the room. Read it. It's just one line.

Please come to the school gate at six o' clock this afternoon.

The name of the sender was…Yasumi Watahashi. So Yasumi left a letter for someone else besides me. But why Koizumi too?

"The β version of myself followed after you. Together with Sasaki-san, Kyouko Tachibana, and also that time traveler, I came to face you. In one way, my alpha version came to the school gate in order to summon me. There, what the two versions of myself saw was the same. The familiar Closed Space. Even though it didn't feel like an omen, I was surprised. Additionally, my beta self called out to the Asahina-san who had come here. Just before I took her into the Closed Space with me, I alone met my alpha self. You know what happened after that. The act of touching made us become one. And then I understood everything."

"That is your weakness, Koizumi-kun," said Asahina-san (big). "Your existence is certainly necessary, but…"

"Cut the crap!" The loud sound of Fujiwara's excited words resounded within the room. I thought he had lost his temper because of Koizumi's long speech, but his sharp glance was on Asahina-san (big), piercing like a surgical laser scalpel. With his body trembling and the anger inside him contorting his face, Fujiwara, who's always making fools of people below him, was fixated on something completely different. This is the first time I had seen his raw emotions.

"You…will you still get in my way like this? Until the world gets ripped into two, won't you at least let me try to fix that future?"

"Even if you alter the fixed time plane, our future will not change. No, it cannot change." Asahina-san said this with an expression of bitter maturity.

"It will change! It's useless for you, for me, or anyone here. But the power that Haruhi Suzumiya holds can do it. If I use that girl's power, I can make the space-time continuum anew for everything that I've lived for."

Fujiwara told us this. "To make the space-time continuum from this time point until the future perfect, I need to completely rewrite it. Not amend the time plane bit by bit, but make an infinitely continuing time plane with every part corrected."

When he was done shouting, Fujiwara looked down as if he had spit out all he wanted to say.

Then he murmured, "I…I don't want to lose you…Onee-san."

An astonishing line. Wha? What was that? Onee-san? Asahina-san is? Fujiwara's? That would mean Fujiwara is Asahina-san's younger brother. But the Asahina-san I know has never given me a single hint about such a thing in any of her actions or words. Would this be Fujiwara's once-in-a-lifetime gag?

Asahina-san (big) shook her head. Her chestnut hair shook sadly. "…I don't have…a brother. So, the "me" who is your older sister doesn't exist. "People…cannot return to…a past that is lost." That was Asahina-san's reply, spurring on more confusion.

But Fujiwara's inner feelings only increased in earnestness, "That's why I came here, to this time plane where humankind flaunts its stupid deeds. Even if we want to forget it, we can't even forget this foolish past. I want to take you back. I joined forces with these extraterrestrial groups just for that. If I hadn't, one of those guys would have…"

"Forget about me. You cannot use the TPDD for something like that. We are existences that are not naturally supposed to be here. In this time plane, you should understand what a valuable person Suzumiya-san is to us. If she wasn't here, our future would…"

"I understand. I have another possibility to gamble on. What the future needs isn't Haruhi Suzumiya, but her power. If it's swapped into someone else, different alternatives will open up. My companion Kyouko Tachibana here found the most suitable person for me."

Kyouko Tachibana's shoulders shuddered again. She gazed downward, and with a slightly teary-eyed face, she met eyes with me. I guess I was understanding, little by little.

That's right. It was Sasaki.

"She can control it better than Haruhi Suzumiya. That would be favorable for us. We would be able to acquire infinite alternatives. We wouldn't be tied down by the 'predetermined events'. We could even make it so there are no 'predetermined events' at all. We can choose our future. That's what I want to do, Onee-san. I want to choose a world with you in it."

He was talking on and on about what he wanted. I wanted to tell him that he's an idiot. The extent of Asahina-san's (small) goodness…I came here knowing that quite deeply. She wasn't informed of anything; the expectations of the future, nor the value of Haruhi and Sasaki. That was her rare but special characteristic. It doesn't matter if she's useless. Asahina-san (small) is a time traveler of the highest level of lovable-ness. She's the only ally of our time period. Because even if you try to change the past, you won't manipulate Haruhi.

That's right. Think about it. If I was able to time travel to any past I choose and freely move time around, I'd surely use the knowledge I gain, which would interfere with history. Ten years ago, a hundred years ago—no matter how long the range, I would certainly not go against my desires. But Asahina-san won't do anything. In a way, she came from the future just to play around with Haruhi. I understood from the beginning that this was something amazing. This campaign just wouldn't be fit with anyone other than Asahina-san. If Fujiwara was in Asahina-san's place, the SOS Brigade would have never come into existence.

"It's useless." Once again, Fujiwara said "No matter how the world goes, Onee-san, I won't let it go where I lose you."

"The person in your time line is different from me. I do not have a younger brother."

"It's the same thing. I will lose you in my timeline. And even at the crossing point into the future, I will certainly lose you again."

"The future can be changed. You're acting like it can't be done."

I want to praise my ears and brain for not quite missing that. What was that? What did Asahina-san just say?

"Something that can do that, huh? As far as the future you've seen, it would be the past in the eyes of an observer from before that time. The fixed events must always be maintained by the eternal conditions. You know that as well, don't you?"

"That's what we exist for."

"But we can't go back in time four years ago from now. There's no chance to amend that time plane surface. Certainly a failure was made somewhere. If so, it should be okay to leave it at that."

"That's an unforgivable thing. Do you understand what you're saying?"

"I understand it better than anyone. Because in order to fix the impending future, you won't be the only ones to forever meddle with time planes. That's right…the TPDD." Fujiwara continued, as if forgetting that I, Koizumi, Kyouko Tachibana, and much less Kuyou Suou, existed.

"A double-edged sword can be a good thing. I'll use the TPDD to maintain the normal value of the time plane, as the upstreaming time flow from using the TPDD is essential. And on its way upstream, I'll destroy the time plane. It'll be simple to fill up the vacant hole in time left by the TPDD. While I was pursuing this, however, I've discovered many different developments. We cannot change the past nor the future."

"Then why are you here?"

"For the sake of this time, right now: this moment of this time period. As we accumulate the instances in time, we can construct time itself. By doing that, the components of the 'present' will give our future permanence and we'll be able to continue changing it. We'll be able to keep modifying all the faults in the time plane."

"It's impossible. If you want to do away with the prohibitations, what kind of energy to you think you'll need?"

"I can do it. I'll say it again. I'll use Haruhi Suzumiya's power. That will be able to do it."

Was Kyouko Tachibana unable to follow this development? "Uhh…eh…just what are you…?" She couldn't remove the dazed look from her face.

Fujiwara completely ignored the pitiful girl and kept speaking. "From this time plane to the future, I'll rewrite the space-time-continuum all at once. It doesn't matter what happens to history along the way. If space and time can be settled in our future, then we'll have the flexibility to look back at the past."

Fujiwara's face got a bit pale as he gulped down some saliva. "Haruhi Suzumiya has been doing 'that' for a long time, long before we came here…"

"It would be unforgivable. For you…your time line…it would be a serious time crime." The fragments of Asahina-san (big)'s sincere desolation gave her a face full of sadness.

Saying "Nice to meet you" would be an odd greeting right now, but I think it might be better to say it just in case.

"Koizumi-kun…" Asahina-san (big)'s eyes, which tend to look down, stared at Koizumi hopelessly.

"Asahina-san, our chance meeting isn’t something that hasn't happened in a long time, right?"

"That may be true." Asahina-san also gave Koizumi the blooming smile of a person who never gives in. Like a prosecutor's witness who noticed a leading question,

"Koizumi-kun, you don't have to say anything. Among humans of the past, you possess an advanced level of caution. However, the 'me' of the present has to heed to prohibitions. But that's right, even if I could say it, it's something I wouldn't say with my own judgment. You are too smart. Even from just a single foolish word of mine, you would receive the information of ten. I really wish I could make it all a fairy tale. That is how I truly feel."

"I understand. Just those words of yours are enough for me. You've shown me what kind of person I am and how I will appear in the future. Even if I assume it's fake for argument's sake, it doesn't matter. I took it upon myself to examine the data here and thus I should be grateful to say the least. Asahina-san, thanks to you coming here, I'm able to understand what I need to do. You showing yourself before me was a great thing. In other words, because of that I must stand up and face what I must. What happens from here on isn't dependent on you alone, but my power is necessary too, isn't it? No, not just me. Suzumiya-san's power is certainly needed, right?"

"Asking questions even though you understand is a good hobby. It's something I have been sensing even before now…Koizumi-kun, among the STC Data I’ve seen, you are an irreplaceable human. That's why you were invited to join the SOS Brigade. You were chosen by Suzumiya-san."

"I am aware of that now. I was doubtful at first, but by coincidence an explanation arrived and now there's no question about it. The SOS Brigade and I are one. Same for Nagato-san and your younger form. But how about you? Grown-up Asahina-san, when you return to the future, what will you have learned? Why did you come to this past to interfere with your former self? I would like you to tell me your standpoint."

"What if I said…it was classified information?"

"I see…that's just what I thought. It would be like going into the past through a time slip and inquiring of the natives there. However…"

His sharp eyes faced Asahina-san (big) and Fujiwara equally. "I would like you to not take the humans of the past lightly. We do not intend to be foolish to that extent. I will not

declare that this is so for every kind of person. But modern-day people concerned about the future in a proper manner unmistakably exist."

I saw an aggressive light in Koizumi's eyes that I had never seen before.

"Little by little, I've also come to understand things thanks to the uproar that these alien folks have caused. The ability that Suzumiya-san possesses…the power to transform reality is not permanent. It's not that it will decrease when it's used, but it's not something she will continuously possess either. It will disappear someday. Am I wrong?"

"Well…" While Asahina-san was trying to evade the proof in this,

"It doesn't mean that you're drawing nearer to a decision on that matter. If you think of the aliens as troublesome people, then they're just as much controlling you and manipulating Suzumiya-san as well. It is indeed possible for her power to be migrated to another person. Since Nagato-san did such a thing before, then these alien beings should be able to do it, too."

He gave Kuyou, who was standing there like a wooden statue, a look of contempt. "This may be presumptuous of me to say, but I want to say it by all means. So I would like for you to let me speak."

Koizumi took a deep breath and once again revealed his true character.

"I would like for you to not take Earthlings so lightly. We are not foolish to such an extent. As for the Integrated Data Thought Entity and other alien forces, we ourselves are thinking hard about them. There are a great number of people doing that at least."

He looked at the time traveler who should be his enemy with a blend of smiling and defiance. "You are of the same opinion too, aren't you Fujiwara-san?"

"Be quiet. You're just spouting insolent nonsense."

After spitting out this proclamation, Fujiwara's eyes looked as though he had resolved himself to ruin.

The siren signaling danger in my brain quickly resounded, its red and yellow lights flashing. This is bad. He's breaking down. He had obviously lit the fuse of a bomb inside himself. That premonition was like an impending magnitude 9 tsunami in my spirit.

His grumbling murmur made it obvious that he was giving off a bitter self-response. "I'm…an idiot. I should have done this from the beginning. Heh, heh, no matter how many words I waste, those who don't understand will not understand. Kuyou, do it!"

Everyone present stood on guard. Kuyou didn't even blink.

"What's wrong, Kuyou? Carry out our agreement." Fujiwara's overbearing order, "Go kill Haruhi Suzumiya!"

What words do I employ in such a situation? I shouldn't really have to say that I digested that shocking line calmly, should I? A vessel. That's right. It's possible to steal Haruhi's abilities. Nagato was able to do it once.

A vessel. If that's the case, then Haruhi's abilities would be fine for anyone to have. But still, it would depend on the person.

A vessel. Right now, who is the one closest to Haruhi? That goes without saying. The most straightforward way to make Haruhi lose her powers would be her death. A corpse wouldn't hold any will. This long-awaited paranormal power…if she was made to lose it in such way, I wonder if all the aliens, time travelers, and espers would also find it regretful?

And there's a perfect person for a vessel. Someone not as capricious nor as eccentric as Haruhi. Someone whose thoughts aren't as difficult to figure out as Haruhi's. Someone who's not the brigade chief of the SOS Brigade. Someone who, compared to Haruhi, is an ordinary and somewhat aloof pacifist…my former classmate.

Sasaki.

I just had a fleeting thought. What if Haruhi's god-like powers actually did sprout from Sasaki first?

That's what Fujiwara's trying to do: kill Haruhi and make Sasaki the new god. She wouldn't lay waste as much as Haruhi. Of course, Sasaki wouldn't be manipulated by Fujiwara and the others into going along with what they say either. But Fujiwara and Kuyou just might have the confidence that they can do it. They might use brainwashing, personality modifying, or even…threaten to take someone hostage. That hostage might even be everything in the world.

If that happens then would I…would I become one of the pawns?

Damn those stuck-up bastards. If they bring any hardship to Sasaki, I would show them all the resistance I could muster for such an occasion. Not just me. I could also depend on Koizumi and Asahina-san (big). And if Nagato were here too…I'm sure she intended to be, but she's probably still unable to move around due to her condition. Because she should have come and made her appearance together with Kuyou here if she were able.

So then, Asakura and Kimidori-san would be good.

C'mon. C'mon, damn it. Why aren't they coming? Darn those useless aliens. I'll make sure to let them have it if we ever meet again.

Fujiwara again pressed Kuyou. "End Haruhi Suzumiya's life! You said you could do it."

"----------"

Moving only her crimson lips, Kuyou's vast expression remained unchanged. "A phenomenon obstructing my movements is occurring. Again, Haruhi Suzumiya, who is present in this space-time-continuum, is surrounding and covering me with a threefold means of opposition. There's no escape from the other Closed Space either. Abiding by your operation code would cause difficulty."

Fujiwara smacked his lips. "So what if it causes difficulty?!”

Kuyou's long hair wiggled. What she showed next was red, shining eyes. Her lips slanted upward into a "V" shape.

An evil witch. Those words rose to the surface immediately.

"-----however, I can summon the target. Yes, like this-----"

She raised her thin arms, extended her fingers straight out, and pointed outside the clubroom window. Everyone including me faced that direction.

"Gah…"

I didn't have time to reprimand my failure at unintentionally letting out a groan. Because…

Outside the three-story high clubroom, that person was floating in the air several meters away from the window behind the brigade chief's desk.

"Haruhi!"

It was none other than the figure of the person who I spent time with everyday during my first year of high school. My classmate who occupies the seat behind me, who took over as head of the Literature club, and who wears the uniform of the brigade chief of the SOS Brigade.

Without wasting any time, I rushed over to the window and thrust it open. You can bet that during that time I didn't blink or avert my eyes at all.

"Haruhi!"

There was no response. Floating there in the sky, Haruhi had her eyes closed as if sleeping and a defenseless expression on her face. Her lips were thinly opened and her body was moving with the appearance of breathing. I couldn't tell if she was actually sleeping or if she had been forced to lose consciousness. With her limbs hanging down loosely like a broken doll, Haruhi wouldn't open her eyes when I called to her.

"-----I forcibly moved this being here from outside the Closed Space. The being over there is the being recognized by everyone here as Haruhi Suzumiya. With this, I have fulfilled my agreement."

"Not yet." Fujiwara turned back and glared at Kuyou.

"My wish is Haruhi Suzumiya's complete death. Bringing her here alive was not my command."

"It will be implemented soon." Kuyou's robotic face reddened a bit. "According to the gravitational acceleration of this planet, a human falling to the ground from such a height would sustain fatal injuries-----. The great mass of the atmosphere would grant a primitive death. As a means of cancelling the preservation of organic life, I judge that this way of doing so is a very natural process."

"So that's it." Fujiwara viciously kicked the ground. "That's a pretty roundabout way of doing it. If that's the Sky Canopy Domain's way of thinking, then they have my respect."

As he was saying this, he turned towards me. "It's as you see, inhabitant of the past. Something like killing that girl is easy for us. Now, what will you do? Let me hear your decision. Will Haruhi Suzumiya's life be wiped out in this place or will you make your beloved Sasaki the new god? C'mon now…Which is it?"

It was a cheap threat. What's more, a very clichéd production at that. My anger simmered and came to a boil inside me. Time travelers and aliens are both such morons. In this kind of situation, do they think I…er, Haruhi would be able to do something like this? In general, saying someone should die by way of killing them means you're just a brat throwing a tantrum.

Seriously, if people from the future are really like this, our fate as mankind is looking pretty hopeless. We're really entrusting the future to these assholes? To these damn assholes? Don't take me so lightly. Don't take the people from present-day Earth so lightly. And more than anything, don't take Haruhi lightly.

"Stop." Asahina-san's (big) sorrowful voice. "This is a meaningless act. Is a catastrophe what you desire? Among the laws of time flow, this would be the greatest of all time crimes."

"That's not my wish. But if I sustain my time line, I will wish for a new time. I would risk it even if I myself were to disappear. But you will remain, Onee-san. No, I will have you remain because…that's the only thing I wish for."

As if boasting of his own faults, Fujiwara stifled a laugh. "Kuyou, construct a symbol that's easier for this incompetent audience to understand."

Silent, her body not stirring at all, Kuyou's eyes turned towards Haruhi and shined slightly.

Outside the clubroom three stories up, as Haruhi floated in the skies above the courtyard, the position of her body began to change. Her upper body was raised and her feet pointed downward. Both her arms were then extended horizontally straight out. From her back, it looked like a black, shadow-like object oozed out. As I was watching and thinking what the common phrases to express this would be, one understood no matter what world you're in, the formation of a cross was completed.

Damn…that bastard…what the hell kind of farce is this? Haruhi was being crucified on a cross of darkness.

Unconscious, her head shaken into a slant, Haruhi's eyes were closed as if she was sound asleep. It may have just been my imagination that she was suffering somehow, but this was certainly not a scene that Haruhi wished for.

To say nothing of the fact that Kuyou and Fujiwara are declaring Haruhi's murder…They're really idiots. Even in a 3rd rate manga from a century ago, commanding such an easily understood villainous plan is incompetent to say the least. If the act of being immersed in satisfaction at the girl being crucified before us is 3rd rate, then the fool showing me this with a sneering expression on his face is below 3rd rate. I understand it so well that it's already reached the realm of gags and slapstick. That's cold. That's too cold, Fujiwara. You don't have the talent of a stage performer or actor. You've let me understand you very well. Amongst the life forms existing in this current space and time, you're winning the title of total low-life by a wide margin. You even fall behind a diatom plant.

However, this cliché wasn't the only thing causing me stress. It really wasn't.

"Damn it…"I leaned my body out from the open window and held out my hands. She was too far for me to reach. But even so, I wanted to grab Haruhi. Even if it meant embracing her, I wanted to try and pull her into the clubroom. I wanted to pinch her cheek and make her wake up. But more than anything, I wouldn't forgive Kuyou and Fujiwara for doing whatever they please with Haruhi. Don't think that it'll end with that, you two. I'll definitely beat you to a pulp, make no mistake about that.

As if he read my mind through my eyes that were going mad with hatred, Fujiwara seemed trying to provoke me. "How does it feel to have your most precious being used as a pawn? No matter what you've been thinking until now, the most important phenomenon for us is Haruhi Suzumiya. The existence of any other human being is worthless. What kind of life you live from now on holds no worth or interest for us. Only the power within Haruhi Suzumiya will determine every matter. If we were to transfer her will and unconsciousness into a different vessel, Haruhi Suzumiya would also become worthless."

Thanks to grinding my teeth, my front tooth got chipped. I absolutely won't forgive this bastard.

"Wait!" The one who emitted that acute voice was Asahina-san. "There's no positive proof that that's the real Suzumiya-san out there. It might be an illusion. Kyon-kun, it may be some visual trick to press you into making a decision."

"No, that's not true." Koizumi came to a conclusion. "If it is a trick, it will not get past me. That’s because I am a being who is, so to speak, an embodiment of Suzumiya-san's unconsciousness. The Sleeping Beauty over there is not an illusion or a clone. She's 100% genuine Suzumiya-san. She's my…our lovable brigade chief."

This is the truth. Koizumi wouldn't lie to me. Bluffing should hold no merit now. If so, then what should I do…

"----------"

Kuyou was silent. It was like she was waiting for a command from someone.

"Ah…eh…um…" Kyouko Tachibana was flustered as if she couldn't follow the rapid developments of the situation.

"It looks like there won't be any negotiations." Fujiwara muttered in a calm, dark voice like he had resolved himself. "Kill Haruhi Suzumiya. Don't worry, Sasaki will take over the remaining task. For you people of the past, nothing in the world will change. You can just live a full and happy life until old age without Haruhi Suzumiya."

Is that really true? Is that all?

Seeking help, I looked to Asahina-san (big). With that female teacher look, adult Asahina-san gently covered her moist eyes. I didn't understand the meaning of the whole older sister and younger brother thing in her conversation with Fujiwara back then. And I definitely shouldn't know which one of them is speaking the truth. It's just that I felt as if I understood Fujiwara's goal. If that's the case, are Asahina-san's (big) expectations a hindrance to it? Is that all?

Becoming swallowed by a whirlpool of doubt, what brought me back to reality was the thoroughly refreshing voice of a comrade.

"If it's something you are capable of doing, then by all means give it a try."

The counterattack I was hoping for started from an unexpected person. Koizumi stood in front of Fujiwara, blocking his path. It looked like he intended to boldly object to the time traveler's plan to murder Haruhi, so why did he have such a composed look on his face? By any chance Koizumi, do you have some kind of plan? There’s no way I could be this calm looking at Haruhi who's about to fall down from three floors high. If we don't have the time to discuss playing tricks or setting traps, then let's not force adlibbing, okay?

Damn it, damn it, damn it…I'm so miserable I could cry. If I somehow let myself fly into a violent rage here, even if my personal record shows that this sullen male high school student resorted to violence, it would be recorded with imperfections no matter what the solution should be. If Nagato were in her normal mode, she wouldn't fear Kuyou. The other side has an overwhelming advantage. If you can ignore the one faltering and getting cold feet, Kyouko Tachibana, and not knowing what to make of Kuyou Suou and the Informational Data Space Entity's humanoid interfaces Asakura and Kimidori-san, if completely different aliens joined forces with Fujiwara, they would change this clubroom here into a danger zone.

As I stood there clenching my teeth, there was someone who gave my back a push.

"Saving the princess imprisoned in a lair of thorns is always the role of the prince. Better yet, it should be called a duty, shouldn't it?" Koizumi shrugged his shoulders. "But most of all, I happen to know something about this one tightly imprisoned princess. Am I right?"

Ah. You certainly are. However, Koizumi, I still have some important business left that involves knocking Fujiwara around.

"I shall take care of that." A large, shiny, volleyball-like orb of red floated above the palm of Koizumi's right hand. "Now I feel like I'm becoming the protagonist of an esper manga. I've waited a long time for this, so please let me play an active role in this ending. This may be the last chance I'll have to fulfill my dream."

He was saying this quite happily, but I think anger would be more fitting for his emotions.

That's right. I'll hand it over to you. You should also partake in some physical exercises once in a while or your body will weaken.

After Koizumi clapped me on the shoulder as if trying to push me forward, he escorted me towards the courtyard, which was illuminated by the madness of the sky. There were several meters of space from the window frame to where Haruhi hung in the sky. It's definitely not a distance I could cover by reaching out my hands. How can I pull her in here?

Or should I-----.

"Kuyou!" Fujiwara's scream was harmful to my ears. "Do it!"

At that moment, Haruhi was disconnected from the neck part of the cross. With her head hanging down softly, she looked like a saint being released from the binds of crucifixion. Slowly, indeed very slowly, her posture became one that would fall head-first downward. Directly under her was the stone pavement of the courtyard. She started to fall.

"Haruhi-----"

Not a thought came to me. Not of consequences, memories, nor senses of duty or justice. I didn't need them. I just kicked the window frame and jumped into the air as if wings would sprout from my back. Like I was pushed by the lifting force of someone unseen, I caught Haruhi in my arms just as she came down. And of course, in accordance with the Earth's gravity, we would come crashing down…Head first.

Haruhi's body was surprisingly slender. It's not something I would know since I wasn't hugging her that close to me. But as I was holding her like that, she felt thinner and lighter than I expected. The sense of warmth and softness I received made me realize that she really does have this type of body…one fitting for a second year high school girl at the peak of puberty.

This is the true form of Sleeping Beauty.

Now there's isn't a single doubt in my mind that the girl gently breathing with eyes closed in my arms is Haruhi Suzumiya; a name that will continue to be engraved in history even after I die. She's the real Haruhi. She's not an illusion that Kuyou made or some scam made by someone else.

Fujiwara seriously used Haruhi to threaten me. You were really serious…even to this extent, Fujiwara? Did you want to do it? You even told me a bit about your unsettling future and not wanting to lose Asahina-san. To accomplish that, you even tried to put Haruhi on your death list…do you really see the shape of the future you should achieve?

But all I can see before my eyes is the sole form of one person. Sorry Koizumi, Asahina-san (big). There's nothing else reflecting in my eyes.

Haruhi Suzumiya. Our brigade chief and reigning governess of the clubroom. Arrogant, easy-going, and brimming with confidence. Manipulating anyone, overcoming anything, plunging forward towards her goals with the force of a bowling ball being shot by a linear catapult…all I can see is the sleeping face of my one and only leader.

Ah. The ground was growing more imminent. Since she was unconscious, Haruhi's body felt limp, soft, and a bit feverish. It's just as Koizumi said. The somewhat delicate extending body, unexpectedly thin shoulders, the unique fragrance…more than anyone, I knew thoroughly well that this is Haruhi.

If humans fall down from high places, they will die spot-on. That's not even mentioning that falling at this rate of gravitational acceleration and crashing down head first into a hard landing with stone pavement I couldn't imagine what kind of state my skull would be in.

Don't you think this is a bit too fast? At the very least, could you lay out a mat? Or how about putting a parachute on my back?

I really don't have time to be reflecting on this. I thought of placing myself under Haruhi so she wouldn't receive the burden of the crash, but it was just a fleeting idea.

The sound of something cutting through the atmosphere struck my earlobes. Guess we're about to reach the ground. I hugged Haruhi close to me more tightly and firmly than anything before. The distance of my death plunge and its steady free falling shouldn't even be enough time for the rotation of a revolving lantern.

Not wanting to see the approaching ground, I tightly closed my eyes and had no choice but to pray to Mother Earth that she would awaken with a sense of duty to become our cushion. I prayed…but..

The moment I prepared myself for crashing, a bluish-white light seeped behind my eyelids.

"!?"

When we were just a hair's breadth away from striking the ground I felt like I was sinking into the soft body of some object. I opened my eyes.

Haruhi and I were completely surrounded by blue light. I quickly moved my gaze around in all directions and noticed that we were floating just a few centimeters above the stone pavement. It looks like this bright blue something-or-other fulfilled the role of our cushion. When I looked up, there was an enormous wall that reached up to the disorderly patterned sky.

"This is-----!"

No, that's not it. This is…a <Celestial>.

A <Celestial> stood in the courtyard. The solitary lord of this gray space, with features clad in pale blue light and arms that could destroy every single building.

"That’s impossible!" I could hear Fujiwara's voice from far away. "Why is that thing here…?"

The <Celestial> caught us in its giant palm. It was a faintly shining being taller than the school building. I won't forget the one time I saw it going on a violent rampage inside Haruhi's Closed Space. Taking the shape of Haruhi's frustration, it's the so-called hollow king of Closed Space. But this time Haruhi and I were riding in its hand.

The <Celestial>'s intentions couldn't have been anything else but saving us from falling to our deaths. But why is a <Celestial> here? Their originator, Haruhi, is unconscious, and what's

more, this is a world where Haruhi and Sasaki's Closed Spaces are being mixed together. Even if it's just a temporary appearance, this giant that even Haruhi can't control continues to serves her like a faithful attendant. But I can't quite figure out how it's connected to this situation of saving her now.

From within the fluffy hand of the <Celestial>, I looked up at the clubroom and saw a perfectly orange colored explosion blow out and dispel through the window. Looks like Koizumi was finally able to shine for once. Never mind Fujiwara, I hope Asahina-san (big) and Kyouko Tachibana are safe.

"Nnn…"

Haruhi started stirring in my arms. From her sparsely opened lips came a small moan. As if being hailed by her, the <Celestial> raised one of its arms and clenched its fist. And with that, it threw a strong punch at the clubroom…

At that moment, I was attacked by a phenomenon of time congestion. I was seeing everything in slow motion.

I looked up towards the sky. On the roof of the clubroom's building, I thought I saw a small human shadow. This silhouette of a female student with slightly permed hair, wearing a uniform too big for her small size is…

Yasumi Watahashi. The sole new club member who disappeared the moment I fused with my other self, was standing by the rooftop without a handrail, looking down on me and Haruhi. The dimming light of the Space made me unable to make out her facial expression, but I'm thoroughly convinced that she was smiling.

After completing a humble bow, she raised her head and faced frontwards.

I was also compelled to shift my gaze to inside the school building on the opposite side of the clubroom. My field of vision began to smoothly distort. But just before then, on the roof of the school building that lay before me, I caught a glimpse of three human shadows. One had short hair, one had long hair, and one had in-between hair. All were wearing a North High sailor uniform…

So you did come, huh? Of course you did…Kimidori-san, Asakura, and also…

No longer confined to a sickbed, well and back to her usual quiet self, the last one was Yuki Nagato. I couldn't imagine that these three wouldn't have noticed the divergence in the time axis. The Integrated Data Thought Entity should’ve known…the outer limits of the world were like that endlessly repeating August. They looked at Haruhi and me and I had no doubt that they were observing everything.

My vision suddenly got dark and this floating feeling started driving me crazy. This time is just like that time before. One time was enough to get tired of tasting that first step of time travel,that dizziness, but now it's come here.

Just as I was about to completely blackout, Yasumi's shadow waved its hand to me. For a way of saying goodbye, that was more than enough. Whether it was meant for me or an offering to the three humanoid interfaces, I probably won't get another chance to ask. That's what I felt…It's alright. I hugged Haruhi tightly. No matter where we fell down to, we'd definitely go together.

Blackout.

After feeling like I was floating, a free fall came. If I just didn't let go of Haruhi, more and more strength would be put into my arms.

Somewhere far away, I thought I heard the voice of Asahina-san (small).

Boom.

"Ow!"

The shock came from my tailbone. While thinking how clumsy it was to fall on my butt, I opened my eyes. There was an overwhelming glare and I closed them again.

Thanks to my getting use to the dimness, the adjustments of my light receptors wouldn't work instantly. But even so, what is this place? According to the information outside my sense of sight, my sense of touch was telling me that I was placing my backside and hands on something that felt like a lawn, and through my sense of hearing I heard the mingling voices of several men and women as if in a bustling crowd.

When I timidly opened my eyes a bit, I was definitely sitting down in the corner of a wide lawn. All I could see around me were male and female students dressed in plain clothes. Amongst one group that looked like they were walking together, one couple cuddled together on the green surface of the lawn.

"What? What is this place? Where was I dropped down to?"

On the opposite side of the lawn, I saw a building that looked like a clock tower. Compared to North High, it was a ridiculously modern-looking school building. Also, the way the groups of students walked was more refined than that of high schoolers. Which college does this look like? The wind was warm. It's probably spring…

My instant assessment of the situation was that it was very well-put together atmosphere. But why? Why am I in such a place?

I immediately started to worry when,

"What's wrong, Kyon?" The voice of a girl descended upon me. One I remember much too well. One whose special character has troubled me enough for more than a lifetime.

While still sitting on the ground, I raised my face, "Haru…"

I became speechless as I said this. I can't even remember whether I rubbed my eyes or not. Somehow, a grown-up Haruhi stood before me, with hair longer than I remember and wearing kimono-like clothes with a tinge of soft colors. The cardigan on her shoulders matched it very well. No, there's no way she could be all grown-up. The Haruhi I know should have just become a second year high schooler. Even so, I couldn't think of how many years after that it's been for this Haruhi…um…what was that? I can't really say it well…that's right. From some point until another point, she's growing up.

"What are you doing? Hey…" This Haruhi showed me a smile as if she would follow up with a joke. I started feeling dizzy.

"Just what do you intend to do wearing that old uniform, Kyon…huh, you look a bit…young…?"

As she was starting to speak, it seemed like someone was calling out to her and she turned around.

"Huh?"

Once again, my vision began to grow dark. Someone was calling out to this Haruhi. And with a gesture of surprise, she answered that person with something like, "What? Why are you doing over there also…" then again turned back to me and said, "Huh?"

I think she had an expression of surprise. My consciousness felt like it was rapidly fading. The figure of that Haruhi standing on the lawn began to move far away, like it was being produced by some special camerawork. I didn't move, Haruhi didn't move, just the distance itself expanded. Darkness began to close in on both sides. This is the door. The will of time is trying to take me back to my place of origin.

As the black wall was shutting completely, I could only see Haruhi mouthing words.

-----See you later, Kyon.

Those words came from Haruhi Suzumiya's kind smile.

Once again, I was falling as if my footing was collapsing beneath me. Floating made me lose my sense of what was up and what was down, and caused my equilibrium to malfunction. Was what I just experienced a dream? Or was it an illusion? I honestly knew that this was what

one would call "time drunkenness." Thanks to the events related to Tanabata, I've not only gone back and forth between the present and past numerous times. The truth behind the saying that hearing something a hundred times is inferior to actually glimpsing it was being driven home into my body and mind. Well, no matter how many times I've done it, I still haven't gotten used to it, and every time I do it my semicircular canals make me realize that they're very weak. But anyone would feel like this if they were riding in a car on a winding, zigzagging mountain road without any rocky suspensions. It's already too late. The inside of my stomach is on the verge of doing a summersault.

How long will it continue? This plunge into darkness…

But not much time passed until the next transition arrived. Right after I reached the destination of my short fall, it seemed like gravity decided to be gentle to me against the opposing braking. When I thought I sensed that I was putting the brakes on my fall forward, strangely this time something elastic struck my whole body. With that impact, I opened my eyes.

"Nnn..gah?" Saying that I opened my eyes was both figurative and literal. Although I couldn't shake off the feeling of being in an unreality of incoherent dreams, I was completely awake now. Like the freshness of awakening on mornings spent in moderate hours of sleep, I was clearly and distinctly waking up, even to the point of being able to immediately recall the dream I just had.

Oh well, that's fine I guess. Even with my intelligent thinking power, it took me up to three seconds to grasp the current situation.

"…? Where am I?"

I was on top of a bed in a dark room. But I knew in an instant that this wasn't my room. The characteristics of the room were someone else's and a scent I wasn't accustomed to stimulated my nostrils. I'll add that it was an excessively sweet smell. It's similar to the scent in my sister's room, but not quite the same. I'm positive that this is a room I've never seen or been in before in my entire life.

Then where is this? Where have I dropped down to?

"What are you…doing?" I heard a stifled voice from directly under me. Although it sounded unnaturally small with just a touch of spunk, it's certainly a voice I've heard before. One that I hear almost every day actually.

As slowly as possible, I looked down. Haruhi's face was right in front of me. Despite the dimness, the illumination from the streetlights flowing in from the thinly opened curtains was enough for me to see that Haruhi looked more surprised than I had ever seen her look before. To make matters worse, in my present situation I was on all fours, with my hands and feet on top of the covers, pinning Haruhi down as she lay there in the bed face-up…that's what it seemed like.

If a third party of jurymen were present, they would by no means hesitate to give me a prompt and unanimous guilty verdict. In this case, any room for excuses would only be big enough for a grain of moth scales…

"…This is…"

I finally realized it. By my own negligence, I've never been to Haruhi's room, much less her house, before so of course this is a place I really don't know. Realizing this on the spur of the moment may be unreasonable, but Haruhi is really right here. So that's the only answer I could come up with through the process of elimination.

This was Haruhi's room and Haruhi's bed. It seemed like this was the middle of the night. Dressed in pajamas, Haruhi was opening her eyes as if she had gone beyond simply being surprised.

"Kyon, why are you…?"

I also don't know what's going on, Haruhi-san. No, no. Before, when I kept falling countless times, ending up being in Haruhi's house, in her room, on her bed, is an event that transcended my imagination.

"Just a minute!" In an excited voice, Haruhi said, "It'll only be a minute, okay? Close your eyes…wrap the cover so it's firm!"

Haruhi slowly got up and pushed me aside. My vision was obstructed when she put the bed cover over my head. A rummaging sound signaled to me that she was doing something. During this interlude, I made a crack in the bed cover on my head and looked around at the furnishings in the room. It's not that I had perverted thoughts on my mind. There was just something I urgently had to confirm.

My guiding mark was placed beside the bed. It was a digital alarm clock you would find in just about anyone's room. Since Haruhi's likely not a person from the Edo period, I expected she had one of these by her pillow instead of a rooster.

Thankfully Haruhi favored the type that showed the year, month, and day on it. The digital figures on the clock indicated to me that it's the most suitable time for the sun to suddenly make its appearance.

And this day just happened to be a certain day in May.

Let's see…what happened up to now? In brief, it was the middle of an evening in April when I was engulfed by the blue light in the Celestial's palm, and assuming this clock of Haruhi's isn't totally out of order, then, damn, it's been close to one month from then until now. This is the future.

Although I've had many experiences leaping into the past and then back to the present, this has become the first time I've jumped into the future. Who made me time travel into the future? Asahina-san (big)? Or perhaps a yet unseen power from the Celestial?

Haruhi was still rummaging around. By the sound of rustling clothes, I guessed that she was changing. But my interest was somewhere else in the room. My eyes stopped on a short designer calendar hanging from the wall in Haruhi's room. This day, today, is the exact date of the present time. To denote this day that's about to dawn, Haruhi had added a flower circle in red magic marker around its black numbers. A double-circle with a border of flower petals—it was just like an exaggeratingly flashy "Good job!" mark on a kindergartener's painting.

I know quite well what anniversary this day is.

Because I also did something similar on a certain date on my calendar's page back in April. Of course you remember it, don't you? Of course you do since I remember it too. This day, one year ago, around the same time as our school entrance ceremony, is undoubtedly an unforgettable day for us. Because this day is…

At that moment, I heard a small bumping sound of something striking the window. Haruhi and I half jumped to our feet at the same time. Haruhi, who had finished changing into casual clothes, didn't complain as I pulled the cover off my head. It seems like she was too deeply interested in the people calling at the window as she briskly stepped over to it. I went and stood beside her.

It was here that I learned that Haruhi's home is a single-home building and her room is on the second floor. It's pretty unfathomable that I didn't know this until now.

When she opened the curtain and looked down, we could see the shadows of three people in front of the house, illuminated by the streetlights.

There's no doubt about who they were. It was Asahina-san (small), Koizumi, and Nagato. With our response, Koizumi just insufferably raised his hand and Asahina-san placed both her hands across her chest. Nagato was standing straight upright in her usual way, and I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart.

Haruhi slowly opened the window. The outside was engulfed in silence, quite similar to the Closed Space we were just in a while ago. This is probably a residential area where the most noise you'll get is from a newspaper carrier running up and down the street.

Haruhi and I stood there holding our breath. Although it didn't look like they had arranged beforehand to come here, Koizumi nonchalantly waved his hand at us. In his other hand, Koizumi was holding something that looked like a package. In an instant, our assistant brigade chief threw the package towards us with a wind-up motion. That throw made a pretty loose

parabola…did Nagato make it do that? But if it were in my hands it would have just been a commendable strike out.

The box in the package was beautifully wrapped in a ribbon with a card attached. Despite the faint light, I was able to clearly read the writing on the card.

Celebrating the first-year anniversary of the formation of the SOS Brigade!
From all brigade members to Her Excellency, our brigade chief, we offer our year-long appreciation.

The irregularity of the letters made it look like each brigade member had written one sentence each. My handwriting, which I have no recollection of putting there, was among them.

No, more than that…

…that's right. It's become this day, exactly a year after Haruhi declared the formation of the SOS Brigade. A year ago, upon receiving a sudden revelation during class, Haruhi pulled the back of my head against her desk, sped up the stairwell during recess, headed straight to the literature clubroom during lunchtime, declared a take-over of the Literature club afterschool, and furthermore proceeded to capture the unfortunate Asahina-san.

From now on, this clubroom is our clubroom!

The SOS Brigade! **S**aving the world by **O**verloading it with fun, Haruhi **S**uzumiya's Brigade.

It was the moment these mysterious members created this club acting as a secret base of systematically secret members who spread trouble of a universal scale within North High. That's right, Koizumi, Nagato, Asahina-san. This should be the reason I'm here, shouldn't it?

"Haruhi?"

Holding the package that looked like it contained a present, I turned towards Haruhi.

"Wh…What is it?" She acted like she didn't know what was going on, but I could tell that she understood the current situation. She let her eyes flutter between looking at my face and the packaged box. She looked like a treasure hunter's assistant who knew he was about to be given a great treasure and was at a loss as to what to do.

At times like this, one is limited to striking head-on. I held out the treasure box with card attached to Haruhi.

"Thank you for your hard work as brigade chief this year. May we continue to be in your favor."

"Idiot."

While saying this, Haruhi received the package in earnest. After she ran her eyes over the writing on the card, she closed her eyes and tightly held the package close to her. For some reason it felt like wet air was flowing by for a moment.

"Kyon, how did you get in here?"

Nope…I couldn't say I came in from the entryway.

"Oh yeah, from the window. I followed the drainpipe and climbed on up. You should make sure to lock everything. It's a good thing that locks don't get tired of being closed."

I had to admire myself for having the nerve to ramble off a string of lies on the spur of the moment.

"Geez, aren't you overdoing it a little? You're bound to be found out if you clamber around so clumsily like that."

Haruhi's expression appeared to be one of smiling and crying. Then her eyes suddenly halted at my feet.

"Why are you wearing our school's indoor shoes? Hurry up and take them off, right now! The floor's gonna get dirty!"

I had forgotten. Up until a little while ago I was at North High…and you were, too. But oh well. Looks like I'm the only victim of a time slip here.

As she watched me promptly take off my shoes, Haruhi approached the window and looked down at the threesome standing there on the private road. I heard her take a deep breath.

"If you're making it a surprise event, I would have liked for you to choose a better time. I was sort of expecting it…that you would do something for me. But it's fine. Getting me out of bed this late at night is beyond anything I would imagine."

"If we hadn't done it like this, then it wouldn't have been a surprise. We wouldn't have been able to surprise you this much if you expected something normal, would we?"

My pretentious advice can be pretty persuasive, huh? I guess it's thanks to all the crazy things Haruhi has done to me up to now. Even if we had made a mess of it, it ended up being a surprise event, so all is well.

Haruhi was still looking downward with a teary face. I'm sure it really didn't matter whether she had locked the window or not. I was really here.

"Kyon." Haruhi came close to my face and whispered in my ear. "I'll show you to the entryway, so try to follow me without making any noise."Her breath tickled me as she spoke, but I dealt with it somehow.

Haruhi tiptoed down the stairs so her family wouldn't suspect anything. With the handwork of a skilled safecracker, she opened the door to her home's entryway.

Finally I was able to meet with the brigade members waiting outside. Since it was the dead of night in a residential area, they were all silent. But I could read their facial expressions. Even now they're impossible for me to understand, but I could tell that everything went well for this.

Nagato presented my favorite outside sneakers to me. This was the standard Nagato. No longer tormented by fever, this was Nagato's indifferent, continually reading, ubiquitous face that has no need for emotion.

Asahina-san, (small) of course, peeked worriedly at me and Haruhi. When I gave her a thumbs-up, she let out a very relieved sigh which quickly turned into a smile.

With all the frankness of someone who had just casually come home from the convenience store, Koizumi said, "I'm sorry it's so late at night, Suzumiya-san. But we've had these strong feelings that we just had to whole-heartedly express regardless of time-of-day."

Why are you saying this while looking at me?

Well, it's fine. I get it. I faced Haruhi, and in my most composed tone, "Looks like we got you pretty good. It wouldn't be a surprise if we didn't attack you while you were in bed, huh?"

Whether Haruhi was listening to me or not, she looked over Asahina-san and the others in turn and said, "But…thank you."

She hugged the present in her arms and revealed a smile that would overshadow even the full moon. Her smile, which usually casts off light like some enormous star, looked just like a peaceful moon…I was…how should I put it? No, I can't say anything…I can't do anything but continue to gaze at Haruhi.

I heard the cawing of a crow somewhere. Damn bird of darkness. I don't remember commissioning you to the SE division.

As if that was a signal, Haruhi lifted her face from the package. "It's pretty late. Let's meet up later in the clubroom, okay? By the way, what's in here?"

"That's something I hope you will look forward to when you open it. And incidentally, the one who picked it out is this bedroom invader here," said Koizumi. "He's even the one who wrapped it all up just for you. The rest of us don't want to overdo our role as mere overseers though it probably would have been fine for him to do everything."

I stopped Koizumi's relentless gabbing by stepping on his foot. But now I see…it seems that somehow my past self was the one who decided on the gift. I can at least theorize to that extent.

Haruhi turned around a couple of times, and as she quietly returned to the entryway, "Be careful on your way home. Especially Mikuru-chan and Yuki…I'm counting on you to see them home safely, Kyon and Koizumi-kun. It should be fine because it's an order from brigade chief."

After leaving us these words with a surprisingly sensible voice volume, Haruhi went inside her house. Well, she really is properly considerate of her parents and the people in the neighborhood. Guess she does have a cute side to her.

After we left Haruhi, myself and the three others walked down the local street as the night was fading away. I understood that today is the middle of May. I could also understand that me being called to the clubroom for a confrontation with Fujiwara and Kuyou, and my soft landing together with Haruhi into the palm of a Celestial, were things that happened just a little while ago for me. But I've slipped into a time close to a month after that. Since I've been here and there through different years in time, it's nothing surprising for me, just a new discovery.

"And so that's how it is." The rather careless way Koizumi said this made me a bit ticked. Maybe it's because he's in a strangely good mood.

"Which means that if I don't time travel again…"

"That's right. It will be very troubling if you don't."

"Um…uh…" Asahina-san raised her hand slightly. Just like the (apprentice) expert on time travel that she is, she faltered a bit as she explained the situation for me.

According to what she said, immediately after I was saved by the Celestial, I jumped about a month into the future. That would be now. Therefore, I had to once more go back to that time a month ago to correct the time flow. Asahina-san would take me there…at some point from now…

I looked at Nagato. She stared back at me with the eyes of a nutcracker doll. Thanks to receiving Haruhi's nursing, I couldn't sense even a particle of her former weakened state.

"Am I allowed to go to sleep until the time freeze comes?"

"Not allowed." Nagato replied immediately. "It is unsuitable for solving the problem."

What does that mean, Koizumi?

"The truth is, another you exists in this current time. The one who was returned to your time of exactly a month ago is the you in front of us."

Excuse me, I've been fusing with my other selves quite a bit.

"That case was different. It's simply that your original self split into two, so for the time travel you were both genuinely the same person. You remained here, but neither of your existences was canceled out."

Asahina-san looked up from beside me. "Since it goes against the ‘predetermined event’…if we can't get you to return to that time, it will be very troubling. Your return to the past is already a ‘predetermined event’ for us—"

So that's it. The proof that I properly returned to my original time is actually because I have another self in this time. The "me" that’s here now has to become the "me" who returned to the past from this time period. At any rate…one month, huh? That's trivial compared to three years ago.

"It's also good for the you who exists in this time period that you came, though I must insist that meeting with your other self would be bad for all involved. So reluctantly, only the four of us were able to meet under these circumstances."

Well, I would have it that way, too.

"By the way, I was told to keep the contents of Suzumiya-san's present a secret. Please give it some thought when you return to your original time."

In a mischievous sort of way, Koizumi said, "Please don't forget to tell the 'us' of one month ago about this day. Though one would consider it to be something impossible, isn't it?"

"……"

I was relieved that Nagato had completely returned to being the usual reticent expressionless girl.

"My past self will give you a full explanation. Or should I say he did."

"Ah, then I'll ask you right away. In the clubroom would be fine."

"No, actually we will hold a meeting in a different location. As for where…well…I'll let you decide, no need to give it a lot of thought."

I turned to Nagato.

"…⋯"

The persistently silent girl didn't say anything. At that time, the last thing I saw was the shadows of three people on the roof. There's no doubt that one of them was Nagato. And

Koizumi had said that there wasn't any change for the alpha route Nagato. She had even said something about wanting to go rather than summon Yasumi.

So you knew everything, huh? What Yasumi is…even the reason the Celestial appeared…However, Nagato turned her back on me in silence. She walked off together with Koizumi, who was waving goodbye.

Should I believe Koizumi? According to him, he's already given me an explanation. To the me of one month ago that is.

I looked to the other person amongst the two of us left behind. "Well, shall we go then?"

"Let’s go!"

Asahina-san appeared to be delighted that there was something helpful she could do. Maybe. Perhaps for the first time Asahina-san, who's always following orders from her superiors without understanding anything, is trying to independently lead a time travel.

But before that.

"Asahina-san?"

"What is it?"

"Do you have a brother? More specifically, do you have a younger brother?"

"Hmm?"

Asahina-san put her finger to her lips, and as she gave a perfect wink, "Information about my family is high-level classified information."

Oh…of course.

I've done it a few times, but I'm still in the process of getting used to time travel. This weightless, dizzying period will end soon. A time slip to one month ago is shorter than three years ago, so the actual time travel should probably be short.

At any rate, when I next opened my eyes, I was in my own room on top of my bed. Probably startled by my sudden appearance, Shamisen, who had been sleeping on my pillow, jumped to his feet and fell off the bed. As he glared at me for stepping on his tail, I looked around. Of course, I couldn't see Asahina-san anywhere.

First I have to check a clock. I had returned to my room on a day in April, Friday, before 8pm.

Just two hours ago, in the literature clubroom, I was involved in a serious gamble between the fate of the world and the fate of the future. Speaking honestly, excluding my colleagues who are currently at that certain place, the only one left who would believe me would be Sasaki. It's not a story I particularly want to make public, but I suppose it doesn't matter.

I gave a good stretch and muttered a line to congratulate myself on returning to everyday life.

"Well, guess I'll take a bath and go to bed." I decided to spend about one day of the weekend clearing my head.

Epilogue

At the beginning of the following week, the world had regained its peace and quiet.

Seemingly restored to her original state, Nagato had returned to school. There's still separate memories in my head regarding her: One set where Nagato has a fever and is bedridden and another set where she's silently sitting in the SOS Brigade clubroom reading books during the Brigade application tests. The strange part is that there are no internal inconsistencies when I think about her actions over the past week. Oh well, time still moves forward.

As for the two different timelines and myself, I can't say which one is true and which one is false. Since they occupied the same time, I'd have to admit that both would have to be true. If I were to recall what Koizumi states is the α version, then I have one week's worth of memories with Yasumi and the other SOS Brigade applicants. But I can also clearly remember another week's worth of memories where I went around with Sasaki and her group in what he calls the β version.

Though two sets of memories are in my head for that week, they're somehow not confusing. When I think of one side's memories, that corresponding set comes to mind and the same occurs for the other side's memories. While they're in the same chronological order throughout the week, their different actions don't ever intersect.

Just thinking about it is beginning to drive me crazy! I've got to relax more when these things happen.

It's like I'm in a state where I can clearly remember two one week periods that would resemble a double-helix structure similar to DNA; going up the stairs simultaneously and never crossing each other while having the same starting and ending points. I'd say that fits my situation perfectly.

Nothing I could've done would have prevented me from going down this divergence.

After both sets of various things happened during the past week, a new Monday starts the week. When I began my pilgrimage up that hilly road I noticed that nothing had changed. Thank goodness nothing strange like that closed space had taken over the school. I sat down at my seat by the window and let the cool breeze engulf me while I waited for the chime to ring. That would signal the start of classes from the principal's office and begin the usual rush to get to ones seat afterwards.

Today Haruhi had nothing special to say. Skillfully maintaining a half-smile and a half-disappointed look on her face, she took the seat behind me.

When I saw that face the thought "I've not seen Haruhi since we met about a month from now" frantically ran through my mind. A remarkably complex idea, but how to convey that idea

isn't on my list of top priorities right now. Much to my relief it would appear that Haruhi isn't thinking about when I broke into her house for some crazy reason late at night and woke her up.

Or so I thought.

"Ah, so something happened." Haruhi placed her elbow on the desk and supported her chin with the back of her hand, "Yesterday Yasumi-chan came over to my house."

…oh.

"She looked so sorry as she told me she had to turn down joining the Brigade."

…oh oh?

"I was shocked. That girl actually is a middle schooler."

…Ah. So that's what happened.

"Well, she lives in my neighborhood. She stole a uniform from her older sister who graduated from North High. She was so desperate to join the SOS Brigade that she snuck into the school after her middle school classes were over. While she wasn't in a panic to join, she just couldn't wait to get into North High to be a Brigade member. Such a mischievous young girl."

Shouldn't you have spotted her when you went around the first years' classes during break? If she wasn't a North High student, you could've discovered that before now. Really now.

Haruhi took her arm off her desk and let it hang loose. She glanced absentmindedly outside the glass window and then murmured, "Yuki's alright now, the Brigade entrance examinations were fun, and today's weather is good. I wonder if even the damned can complain with good events like these. I just can't believe that the one girl who was promising turned out to be someone who isn't even in high school. And I waited so long for someone like her too."

As for whether Yasumi actually met Haruhi, I don't know. That meeting may have been false, but Haruhi tends to tell the truth.

"It'll be tough to do it next year when we'll be in the middle of formal applications to universities, won't it? Ah, this year without exams would've been great."

"How many years ago did I think that sort of thing when I was in middle school? Maybe it might've been two years. No, it was maybe three years ago."

As if she was assessing my reminiscing words, Haruhi raised her eyes and leaned forward to the tip of my nose. "That reminds me. You aren't keeping any secrets from me are you? Did you meet with anyone Saturday? You better not have planed anything strange against me…"

Your perception gets better as you age Haruhi. It just happened to be that type of event.

"Nothing like that happened. I slept for half the day on Saturday and took Shamisen to be immunized on Sunday."

Haruhi focused her eyes on me with a Gorgon like stare for several seconds until she released me from her gaze. "Well, if it's only something like that then you're good to go."

"Hey, Haruhi."

As I called out to her, the spring sun illuminated her face and I had to look away. If I continued, the atmosphere would somehow greatly mature between us.

"What?"

"Say in the near future a time machine was made and the you from that time went back in time to now. If you that's currently here met the future you, what would you say to the future you?"

"What?"

Haruhi scowled with a puzzled look on her face, "Several years from now I'd be a university student, right? Then if that me met the present me…hmm. I'd have to say that I wouldn't say anything strange at all because I have confidence that the me from two, three, or even four years in the future wouldn't change much. Why do you ask that?"

"It just came to me. I was just thinking about when I would mature in the future."

"Kyon, that relieves me. Surely I think I'll be the same as I am now, but wouldn't you say that you've grown up mentally since you were in middle school?"

I'm lost for words or even something to object to from that. But Haruhi, I did travel several years in the future from now and met you. I ask that you continue to take care of me. Please let me see that kind smile that you showed me then.

Also, I was there that time too.

Just as I was opening my mouth to answer Haruhi, the chime to start class rang and my savior, our homeroom teacher, Okabe came into the classroom. Thank you bell and our hot-blooded teacher Okabe.

And thus, inconsistencies had sprung from within the unification of my memories of each person when the world split. My memories had been seemingly double-layered and yet somehow unconsciously sorted. It was similar to a system where if I remembered one side, the other wouldn't come around to distort my consciousness.

I could remember Haruhi when Nagato collapsed, but I could also remember Yasumi as well.

For the most part, the world remained the same but there were different memories that sprung up from what Koizumi calls the α and β periods. Excluding the SOS Brigade, it seems it only affects Taniguchi, Kunikida, Sasaki and Kyouko Tachibana.

Things have calmed down since we ended with no new club members. It looks like this incident has already been settled.

While that may be inconsequential and something that Haruhi would think, it's something I've been thinking about since talking with Koizumi and Nagato last night. Or one could say I actually summoned them to chat. Not being able to gather the strength to leave my house, those two came over and we talked in great detail.

Our topic: things like when Haruhi and I fell and were caught by the <Celestial's> hand and when I was flung several years into the future for example.

Since then, nothing's happened in the clubroom. I wonder if the two timelines have compromised what's in there. I've not seen Kuyou Suou or Fujiwara, but I'm still curious about who Yasumi Watahashi is.

Excluding Haruhi, everyone in the SOS Brigade seemed to have this "know-it-all" look about the situation one month in the future. Those guys were quite annoying then.

And so when the intercom rang I, along with my sister and Shamisen, went to greet the "I'm going on a date after this" clothed Koizumi and the as-usual school uniformed Nagato. Her eyes had a healthy dark complexion that was usually there.

Ignoring Koizumi, it was an extreme relief to see Nagato standing expressionless. That was all the proof I needed to know she was healthy.

As the two took off their shoes in the entranceway, Shamisen came over and rubbed his head against them. Sometimes he comes over and greet our guests like that. He's not trying to be a great host; it's just natural for cats to install their odor onto everyone they meet. He rubbed his head against Nagato's ankles while purring for some time. Perhaps the mysterious life forms sealed inside Shamisen haven't affected him yet.

And then my sister said, "Yukikko! Koizumi-kun! Welllcome!" With a smile that was lit as much as a burning furnace, my sister wanted to follow these two around. I had to send her to the kitchen so that I could escort these two to my room.

Before I noticed, Nagato had brought Shamisen to my room. The count in my room increased to two people, one cat, and the normal one. Oh well, it's not like Shamisen would be troubled by our conversation.

"So it seems you have quite the story."

Koizumi sat on my bed and crossed his legs. "Well, you and Suzumiya-san did suddenly disappear from our sight at that time. I knew instantly where Suzumiya-san was though…"

What is this guy leaping to now?

"Of course she returned to her house. We can't tell if she's the α or β version, but regardless she was returned home like nothing happened. She might remember an uncomfortable feeling from that time, but other than that she'll not remember a single thing."

Nagato gently sat down on my bed and silently put Shamisen on her lap. Rubbing up against her stomach, he began to purr loudly. It seems he's become greatly attached to her.

Putting what happened after the mixed closed space incident aside for a moment, there was something on my mind.

"Nagato"

"……"

Nagato stopped her massage of Shamisen and looked up at me.

"Has your fever gone away?"

Shamisen's foot pushed into her as Nagato nodded.

"The Sky Canopy Doman, was it? Were you able to make any strong communications with them?"

"That has been halted for the immediate future."

While stroking Shamisen's throat as he rolled over she continued, "It has been decided not only by the Integrated Data Thought Entity but the Sky Canopy Domain as well that communications are at the lowest information requirement currently. They have recognized that I serve as an insufficient information transmitter due to my damaged accuracy in the transmission process. Therefore I have been removed from my post and given a new one: to observe and report not only on Haruhi Suzumiya, but Kuyou Suou as well."

It seems that, due to the temporary interference towards the Sky Canopy Domain, Nagato was restored. I can't say how good it is to see her as she was before.

"However that has not finished the talks," Nagato stated without any disappointment in losing her position. "We have arranged to move to stage two: a mutual understanding phase. This was only judged to start after my role in stage one's communication process was suspended. I have not been told who the succeeding interface is, but they will likely perform more adequately than myself."

So this was a pre-staged performance from Kimidori, huh?

"Wait."

With that, will Kuyou still be in this world?

Nagato stopped tugging on Shamisen, "She will not disappear. Currently she is enrolled in Kouyouen All-Girls Academy and will stay there as a student. Her main goal is to achieve autonomy for herself but that will take time."

And then Koizumi replied, "Perhaps this won't be the last time she appears then. Well, we weren't able to question her properly when we have met. It seems like that future line has been interrupted by something. It's similar to what happened to Asahina-san's time travelling companions: Suzumiya-san has given birth to a new time fault. Well, that's all I can say from what Asahina-san told me in the past."

Wait, when did that conversation happen?

"Immediately after Suzumiya-san and yourself disappeared, the <Celestial> vanished. It was a scene I'm quite familiar with. Following that, closed space completely crumbled per usual. Not only Suzumiya-san's, but Sasaki-san's as well. The world had returned to the usual peace and quiet. At that time it was just the adult version of Asahina-san and myself. I suppose Kyouko Tachibana would be considered an extra as well. Fujiwara and Kuyou Suou were nowhere to be found."

That was the crossroads from Yasumi Watahashi.

"Did Asahina-san (big) speak with you?"

"Just a little. She seemed to be considerably sorry for Fujiwara, but that's just my opinion based on how she was appearing though. My guess would be that in order to protect her own timeline, she came back to our time in order to protect against Fujiwara's somewhat impulsive actions. That's all I can theorize given the shortage of information as she said nothing that would be of use."

Likely she came due to Fujiwara attempting to kill Haruhi in order to make Sasaki a god. That would greatly disturb Asahina-san (big)'s future. Immensely so.

"Usually Asahina-san is…" Koizumi started as he watched Shamisen flap his tail around. "alone here in this space time. Her comrades in the future sent her here even though she is unlikely to have been trained how to exist in this time if that future is overwritten…and yet she still didn't express her true motives."

Hmm. And then?

"I gave her a compassionate smile and she left the clubroom. I immediately followed outside but I didn't see anything resembling her anywhere. Likely she returned to the future."

How much should I believe these two's statements? Both Koizumi and Asahina-san (big) may be lying.

"What about Kyouko Tachibana?"

"As the worlds united she became dumbfounded. For a short time she was puzzled but immediately after she calmed down and slumped her shoulders. One would say that she was heartbroken to say the least."

So she was like that.

"Yes, she was quite depressed. She seemed to be carrying quite a heavy load on her back from what I could tell."

At this time Koizumi took out his cell phone. "But before we left I exchanged phone numbers and e-mail address with her in case she needed a contact."

How shrewd. This would be the action of a calculating ladies' man.

"Almost immediately I received an e-mail from her. The subject said…"

For a number of reasons Kyouko Tachibana withdrew from her group. She fully realized she wasn't like her time traveling or alien companions. She'll still continue to think about her chances of success despite that it'll just be wishful thinking.

Koizumi shut his cell phone with a click, "That is very relieving. If by chance we meet again we have properly set standards for correspondence."

You look frightfully happy right now.

"Afterwards she wrote that she's retiring for now as a postscript. Her companions are going undercover for the time being. From here on she hopes to continue to be rather close friends with Sasaki-san. She wishes that they can support each other from here on out but I'm curious how successful that will be."

I don’t think that Kyouko Tachibana will have any devious plans for Sasaki in the future.

While Koizumi and I were having our conversation Nagato was serving as Shamisen's personal masseuse. Apparently the cat didn't mind her actions. Either she wasn't interested in our conversation or she was gathering information from the mysterious life forms embedded on Shamisen.

"Kyon-kun! Yukikko!"

Suddenly the door opened and my sister jumped into the room. "Yukikko! Let's play together! Shami's coming too! It's like he'll be our own little cat toy! Puweeze?"

"……"

Nagato stood up holding Shamisen at arm's length. My sister hurried her out of the room as she repeatedly tugged on Nagato's arm. Reading the situation, maybe she wanted to play with my sister and the cat rather than listen to the continuation of our talk.

And thanks to that Koizumi and I were able to have a face-to-face chat. I feel somewhat gracious now.

"The opaque closed space of Sasaki's that occurred seemed like it would last forever. How did Haruhi's closed space end it?"

I remember that spectacle of mixed colorful and gray space.

"That's not that difficult to answer. Suzumiya-san intentionally made Sasaki-san's end. That is the reason I was summoned and why the <Celestial> appeared as well."

How strange. At that time, how did Haruhi take her and I to a place outside the school if she wasn't aware of her surroundings?

"She was perfectly aware of things if you think about it."

Koizumi smiled like an upset cram school lecturer. It like the student is being put through four kinds of torture when the obvious answer is right before their eyes.

"At that place and time was there anyone else there? The only ones that intruded were similar groups. Despite the fact that it was only aliens and time travelers there to begin with, the espers also came along and suddenly we had all gathered at that place. Perhaps being the ones to win over her, you and I were summoned. Well, both of us from the α space time that is."

By Yasumi Watahashi. Just what is she?

Koizumi easily answered that question. "That girl truly is Suzumiya-san. Suzumiya-san created another person from herself to come forth."

Tell me what you know if that's true. When did you notice it?

"Weren't you instructed of it from the very beginning? It's really simple. Here, lend me a pen and paper if you'd like to know how."

As I looked on, he moved the pen gracefully across the page and formed the words "Yasumi Watahashi".

"It's a simple anagram. One that could be solved with no hints whatsoever since no clues were given to us. Here, take a look at the name as it is now and it should be easily solvable."

Stop chatting and move on with your point!

The character for "Yasumi" is just a smokescreen. If we pronounce it as it should be, "Yasumizu", and add her last name of "Watahashi", we get "Watahashi Yasumizu." Let's write it in roman letters:

-wa-ta-ha-shi--ya-su-mi-zu

"If we convert this as an anagram we get…

-wa-ta-shi-ha--su-zu-mi-ya.

I am Suzumiya.

Koizumi put away the mechanical pencil. "Suzumiya-san used her power unconsciously. She split the world for the sake of guarding against an attack. One world would have been our future and then there was the other one that was formed against it. Despite being unaware that girl was able to sense the danger ahead. That's why Suzumiya-san protected this world. If she hadn't, there was the chance that you would've been overwhelmed by our enemy's power. Thus that girl acted to save you and Nagato-san."

That theory has drained all of my vocabulary.

"As for when it began, I can't even begin to guess. The last day of spring vacation and the first day of the school year were very influential times. Perhaps she predicted it after that, unconsciously of course. You could say it was a unknowing prediction."

There are common memories until the time when I entered the bath. It had to have been instantly when the phone my sister had brought hit my ear.

On one side it was Sasaki who called. On the other, it was Yasumi who called.

"Suzumiya-san had foreseen that you and Nagato-san would have been troubled in the future. Accordingly she acted beforehand. Thus her other self appeared and the α route was formed. That power that she holds is immense. There are still things that we don't know about it."

I saw that Koizumi's face was engulfed in fear.

"Yasumi Watahashi is Suzumiya-san's unconsciousness brought to life. Literally a deed that was carried out unconsciously when she called out to save you and Nagato-san. While she may not know it, Yasumi Watahashi disappeared when the worlds were united. It's like a dream fading the instant you wake up. Well really all of that might have been just a dream. We may all

be illusions in a dreamlike world to Suzumiya. In the worst-case scenario this may just be an unreal world we live in."

Don't start that again. Just what are you talking about in regards to Haruhi?

"An astonished feeling. Though I may regard Suzumiya-san in some respects to be like a god, there may be necessary alterations to the tenets."

That guy won't stop giving off that feeling of worship towards her will he?

"When I said that Suzumiya-san may be gradually losing her power that might not have been wrong. As she matures, there is the potential that she may be able to control it emotionally. That would explain the intellectual actions of the <Celestials>. Since she's been able to unconsciously control it up to now, her power has been fierce. For example, if you take a keyboard and write some gibberish sentences on it the likelihood of it coming true would be practically zero percent. But that action would be easy to do. Eventually you'd be able to write without thinking about it. Disregarding perfect statistics, you'd be able to cross over one day and become a god if you kept typing truths."

If that's true, why hasn't she gained control of her power?

"It's just a guess but after looking at her psychological state her power would be considered the leftovers. Despite that her power resembles one similar to a god's there's still much left over that she can't control. Just look at legends from humans past. Gods' powers and words were strangely fickle and at times irrational. One can't say that they always treat humankind kindly. Occasionally they had to remind our faulty human race things they should be doing. But gods are only what human myths produced, thus the appearance of gods on earth are shaped wherever those legends are."

That's it, I give up. Even though you frustrate me, you have some points about the past.

But what about Asahina-san (big) and Fujiwara's relationship? Doesn't that go against time-travelling theories?

"We know it's possible to deviate from chronological order. Both you and I weren't able to recognize the overwriting of this time plane. It's similar to the ten-thousand summers we went through last year. Having memories of the two diverging routes would be considered paradoxical proof of this. "

And?

"What we experienced was due to Suzumiya-san's power creating an artificial time plane. How it changed the difference between Asahina-san and Fujiwara's future is something I cannot know. It could be that from the identical future one has become a slider. There also exists the

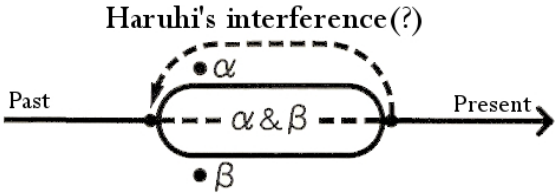
possibility that one is lying. Even worse both could be faking their stories and what they have told us. After all, how would we ever know?"

Our time-travelers don't talk about their true feelings. Those would be unlikely to be considered classified information.

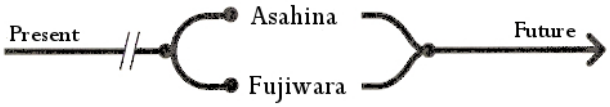
"Certainly. This is only my perception but I feel that the future doesn't diverge into various forms due to natural phenomenon. Those alternative routes that simultaneously progressed and then combined at the end…Can we go through repeated divergences and reunions and still consciously remember each one? I think we can. Let me draw something."

Once again Koizumi had the pen in his hand and began to scribble lines.

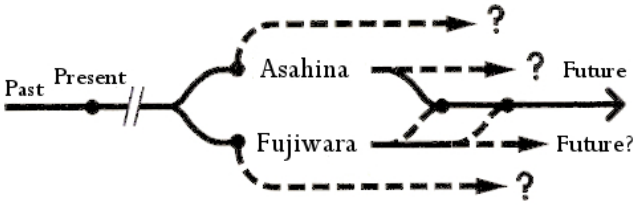
"Originally we were to only travel down the β route. There Suzumiya-san expressly intervened and created the α route. Thanks to that intervention we are all here now. How the α myself and you are here and yet Yasumi Watahashi is not I don't know."



"I get the impression that Asahina-san and Fujiwara's future similar to this drawing. But if we assume there's another divergence and reunion, then it would look like this."



"While they do diverge and integrate, there is a possibility that the integration takes place in the future. Asahina-san may interact in the past to protect her future from falling away. She guides you so that her own space time can continue to flow."



Good grief. This has gone way over my head. He has a different opinion on the mater than Nagato…but it's not that different than what I remember.

"That reminds me, you've changed how you talk. Mori-san and you, and let's include Arakawa-san too, just what is your relationship? I'd say Mori-san would certainly have to be your superior."

Koizumi had a very interesting look on his face as he stared at me,

"How would you say that? Is there some problem you see at our Organization?

"Mori-san always addresses you without any honorific yet even when you're around the Brigade you still address her as Mori-san."

Yes! I've finally gotten in an unexpected attack, but Koizumi immediately went back into his funny smile mode.

"We at the organization have the same primary goal, thus like any good public corporation we try to not have any type or rankings. Regardless of how important you are, everyone is on the same level. Mori-san is Mori-san, thus she allows anyone to address her however they wish."

Oh well. I'll leave it at that for now. Considering what I don't know about the Organization, that may have been too much of an inquiry for now.

"Ah, one more thing. This isn't such an important matter, but it's good to let you know about it. I sent a picture of that flower that Yasumi brought to decorate the clubroom for analysis. It's come back as a completely new variety. The Latin species classifier is the only thing left to be decided. That girl certainly fulfilled her promise. Such a faithful person to follow her orders and bring such an interesting thing for the SOS Brigade trials. It may have been Suzumiya's powers that created it via her inner child. Ah, please forgive me for rambling on. I hope to one day encounter it again."

Koizumi stood up with a somewhat embarrassed smile. And with that our meager holiday meeting was over.

The two downstairs, Nagato and my sister, had already started to ignore Shamisen and were in the middle of an enthusiastic shoji game. Afterwards I was told that my sister had a series of victories over the alien. Really?

But now I think about it.

What if, that time…What would happen if I had chosen Sasaki? Haruhi's power would be transferred to Sasaki and the fake SOS Brigade would be formed. Instead of Koizumi I'd have

Kyouko Tachibana, substituting for Nagato would be Kuyou Suou, tossing away Asahina, we'd have Fujiwara, and in the middle we'd all be around Sasaki.

And then the possibility lies that I would be targeted to be killed. Likely by none other than Ryouko Asakura. They say the third time's the charm. Kimidori probably wouldn't stop her this time and I have no idea what Nagato would do after that.

Would Nagato revolt against the Integrated Data Thought Entity? Maybe I'm over-thinking things.

Long ago I was thrown into the SOS Brigade. It was like I had been placed in the deepest portion of a swamp without any scuba equipment and I couldn't get to the shore. Therefore I had to reach a sandbar to save myself. I had gotten tired of being with my comrades that were just gazing from the shoreline of a vast beach and began searching for a unspecified someone to change things. It was like I was someone else at that time.

But I don't need anyone else's opinion now. Haruhi, Asahina-san, Koizumi, and Nagato's opinions are my own. There's no mistake that we all share a common ideal. That's why I chose to stay the course. We'll all move forward together. If we happen to get on split rails, then we'll just construct new ones so we can reunite.

Just like that until the end of time.

And so that Monday after school I abruptly left on a whim and had something happen. Lessons had ended and since club activities were on break our brigade leader quickly left. We club members, that is to say Asahina-san, Koizumi, and myself, briefly met in the clubroom and then left on our own.

I was thankful that we decided to be by ourselves just a little bit longer after all that had happened.

Nagato stayed as the head of the Literature club and seemed to read books about a three stringed guitar. I hope no interested applicants inadvertently stop by that den of evil while we're out. I'm sure Nagato has manipulated data so that won't happen.

I took out my bike from the station and went past the usual road to my house towards a different direction. I ended up going by the "usual meeting grounds" or in other words the park in front of the station where the SOS Brigade usually met. Well, given what's been going on lately I can't call it the SOS Brigade meeting place as I've bumped into Sasaki, Kuyou Suou, and Kyouko Tachibana there lately.

Naturally I didn't think there would be anyone there today. I wasn’t planning to meet anyone at all. But like flipping a coin, there appeared to be a 50-50 chance that something would happen after all. While I was contemplating the odds, it was too late.

"Hey"

Sasaki stood in front of the park and waved her hand. "I thought that I be able to meet you here. While I may make mistakes at times, my perception is usually pretty good at things like that. You might call it something like a sixth sense."

Illegally parking my bike, I went towards Sasaki. With a gentle persona and a smile that would calm anyone, she summoned me over to a wooden bench.

Watching the students enter and leave the station like fish swimming up and down a river we sat in silence for a little while. Then Sasaki broke the ice.

"I appreciate what you did the other day. Though in the end nothing changed for me, I enjoyed spending time with you beforehand and when we were at the cafés. I heard from her that you went into my Closed Space."

And so, are you alright now?

"I'll be okay. It looks like that got stopped before it became too much for me to handle. It's like going up and down that steep hill you traverse every day. Honestly, I admire you for going through it."

It's not that bad. Go around the hilly shopping areas and you'll soon get used to it.

"I heard the full details from Tachibana-san."

Sasaki kept her gaze around my loafers. "I feel a little bit sorry for Fujiwara-kun, but things didn't go so well with him did they? But thanks to you I won't have to become some god-like figure."

From that tone I understood the real motive for Sasaki. This elegant yet impulsive style was just how she passed time back in middle school wasn't it? But one thing stuck out for me.

"Let me ask you about something."

"Sure I guess. You can ask me anything, well with the exception of studying I suppose. I remember you were always like that when we in middle school."

"When you came over to my house, there was another reason other than Fujiwara wasn't there?"

Looking straight at me, Sasaki's eyes opened immensely. "Ah that. You remember that don't you? From how casually you were talking, I didn't think you remembered. I shouldn't have underestimated your memory."

With a laugh and a sigh, Sasaki looked up to the sky. "Two weeks before we talked, I was confessed to."

At that moment every comment I could say was blocked. I was in complete silence. It was as if every bit of Japanese I knew was scattered in the air. I couldn't say a single thing.

Sasaki continued, "It was a guy from the same middle school as us. I was very curious about the person who confessed to me. What he did was quite moving I thought, but I couldn't immediately give him a reply. After all, it was a surprise attack. Therefore I put that on hold."

If you think about it, Haruhi and Sasaki are quite similar. If either of them were silent, they'd easily catch the eyes of any guy. But of course they'd have to speak sometime.

"My goal was to talk about my love life. Wouldn't it be something along the lines of passing my meaning on similar to what a strand of messenger RNA does? Ah, I'm sure you'll go through this with your sister."

Sorry…that's not very helpful.

"Oh well. When you're troubled, shouldn't you talk with people around you about what's troubling you? Besides, I reconsidered right beforehand to solve my problems by myself. Besides, you give too much noise for anyone to actually make a good decision."

The silence stuck around. If asked, I'd try to give some idiotic retort as my reaction, but I couldn't think of something to say. I need to brush up on my vocabulary for sympathy phrases. Maybe our librarian Nagato would recommend some books for me.

While my insides were still feeling like jelly, Sasaki said something that broke that stagnant feeling. Yes, it was a shocking new revelation.

"Suzumiya-san and I went to the same elementary school. While we were always in different classes, I could always see how that girl lit up the school with a light like she was the sun. Even in a different class I could feel that light coming from her."

This has got to be a trick. Haruhi and Sasaki met before that time when we met together?

"I had wanted to be in the same class as her, but alas it was never to be. Then when she went to a different middle school it got to be too complex. I was a bit lonely and a bit relieved at the same time. Oh, I see she still stares at your eyes with the intensity of the sun. You know that when we part with the light, we get a little bit colder right? But that's not too bad. Do you understand what I mean Kyon?"

Somehow I do.

"Due to family issues my surname changed when I went to middle school. Therefore Suzumiya-san wouldn't have recognized the name Sasaki. My appearance is a bit stranger as well. Suzumiya-san also changed by cutting that long hair that I admired but it still looks nice. I was a little bit nervous and thus I didn't mention anything about our past. I think that would have been something like a confession to me."

Quietly I took a breath. Once again, human relations can be quite complex at times. If you think about it, there's a great number of humans in this world. Therefore there's a great amount of meetings, partings, and reunions. That's not including the countless amount of drama that's spread as well.

After all the only things I know are due to the outskirts of the people I know. Unless I'm told about it, there's no way that I would know strange events and relationships that are formed.

"That's not entirely true Kyon."

Sasaki had regained her bright and cheerful smile. "Can we only consider what's reported on the news true? Surely there are things out there that we don't know about. Near the edge of the universe, in another universe, or even the meaning of the universe are things we don't know. I've only started to get to the bottom of things I don't know. While we know that there are answers to our questions, there may be answers that we don't exist in our thoughts. I've thought about it; if mankind were to not know the truth of our demise, then should we call out to some god-like being?"

Once you expanded onto a universe-scale I wasn't able to understand where you were going.

"It's just the power of our imagination as humans. It's the one thing that we can brag and boast about. If by chance we have to oppose some type of god-like figure, then it's a little something we can use against them."

With a chuckle Sasaki continued. "If you'd like Kyon, I can serve as Suzumiya-san's substitute at any time. Of course, I know that you'd only want to see that as a solution if it was the last thing possible. Well, that's not quite right I think. My wish is that you should be able to solve this problem if it occurs. Anyway, the chance of that happening aren't able to be expressed in numbers. Thinking of it as anything greater than zero would be absurd. It's just nonexistent.

As usual you're right.

"There probably wasn't anything I could do in this case. Like I thought, I'm not suited to be God."

It's a good thing she wasn't suited to be one unlike the person who thoughtlessly drags me through trouble countless times. After thinking things through, I realize that there was nothing I could do that would have been best for everyone. Sasaki probably thought that as well.

"Yeah, I wasn't going to play the role of some half-thought-out villain in this story. It'd be such a big price for me to pay with little benefits. Something like being incredibly talents yet only using that talent to play cheap tricks on stage. But I'm not able to rise to the stage like actors and actresses do; keep in mind, this wasn't like acting at all."

The one who would know about the drama that my surroundings have turned into would be Koizumi. Not me at all. I should really write a letter of complaint to the scriptwriter who wrote this scenario.

"Just as I couldn't take that power on as I am, you couldn't as well as you are. There's no one else that could mimic Suzumiya-san at all. Surely that girl couldn't live up to it consciously. That's why her intervention wasn't precisely aimed. It'd be impossible for someone to fully know how to use that power."

These riddles are good enough for me. Sasaki, how long is this psuedo-philosphical conversation going to go on?

"How rude, Kyon. Well, I've already finished."

Sasaki had already returned to her usual mood.

"I was very pleased to discover that you had steadily increased the amount of people you connected with. As for me, I've tended to be absorbed in my studies. I'm not able to enjoy myself like I did in our middle school classes. Even with how these events went, I'm still not able to enjoy life like I did before. The school I go to was primarily boys-only until recently, so there are only a few girls there now. It's a difficult environment for me to enjoy myself in; somewhat like trying to break through a glass ceiling there. That's why I've found that I enjoyed the time I spent with you Kyon very much. The only person I've met since then who accepts me as I am is you. The times we spent eating our school lunches at your desk together were very precious to me. That's something I didn't realize until there wasn't anything to replace them. And then I took great care to keep away from you. There's only one man who's treated me normal after meeting me: that would be you."

Again, she giggled. "Well, that was unpleasant. It sounded quite like a confession didn't it? Please don't misinterpret it. That wasn't my real intention at all."

It's everyone else who doesn't understand. Somehow or another everyone else gets these weird ideas in their heads about us. Since Kunikida's brain specializes in memorizing things, he easily remembers these instances.

"Is that so? I try my best to remember, but when I trying to improve I end up forgetting it again. It's just like how I've forgotten all the techniques we learned for the high school examinations. Those memories have likely been lost in the year since then."

Sasaki brightfully continued, "And yet that's fine with me. I'm able to remember new things now. It wouldn't be good for me to only remember things I learned in the past."

As if she was breaking through something troubling, Sasaki stood up with vigor, "Well, I've got to head to cram school. It's something I've got to do for myself. It was good to talk with you Kyon."

And then Sasaki headed towards the ticket counter at the station.

As I was looking at her slender back, I threw my voice towards her with all I had. "See you later close friend! We'll surely meet again at the class reunion!"

I didn't know whether or not my voice was heard. Sasaki didn't raise her hand in acknowledgement. Regardless how many years it takes before we meet again, the first words I'll say to her will be "Yo, close friend."

And just like that Sasaki and I walked down different paths again. With a month to decide, I've got to choose whether to rush or to take it slowly finding that gift. After all, a month can be either long or short depending on how things go for you. Oh well, I should decide when the time comes.

At any rate I continued walking down that path. I anticipate that I likely won't think about what present I should get Haruhi any day soon. I'll probably get some type of letter or e-mail about it. I've got a hunch that this will be a good reference for me to use picking it out.

And so the next day, Tuesday, came.

As I've walked up this tedious hill for a year now, I could remain in silence today.

"Yo! Kyorosuke!"

With someone striking my back with the same force someone would use to crush a cockroach, I staggered forward. I turned my face and there, with a illuminating smile on her face, was my senior who shined like a laminated rare card.

"Good morning Tsuruya-san."

"Morning Kyon-kun! Today sure looks beautiful, doesn't it?"

I looked up at the skies to confirm that, indeed, they were cloudy. I then returned my gaze to Tsuruya-san, who was cackling.

"Not the weather, I'm talking about you! Your face looks so refreshed. Last week you had a nervous look on your face like something bad was happening, but now it looks like you're finally got some clear skies ahead of you."

Anyone would be down after those sequence of events. Even beyond Haruhi's skill, Tsuruya-san's perception is quite sharp. Just from one look at my face and she has more than the information she needs. While I'm surprised, you couldn't say that it's mysterious from her.

"Do you mind if I ask you something Tsuruya-san?"

"Whatever would it be?"

I stepped forward so we'd be walking in unison,

"What kind of person do you think I am? I'd like to hear if you think I'm a good person."

"What? Is something wrong? Tell me about it and I'll give you my thoughts."

"Well, it's just that you're always frank about things. I get the impression that all I can get from Koizumi and Nagato are ambiguous jokes. I'd like to hear the truth for once. "

Tsuruya-san started to chuckle again, "Mikuru-chan's no good either, right? That girl wouldn't give anything but a good compliment."

Then Tsuruya-san suddenly looked into my face. "Hmm, Kyon-kun is…that. You're the type to have minor friendships. You never rebuke anyone with cheap words, but instead I sense that your words are carefully fine-tuned. You don't have any interesting stories that make people laugh nor do you speak and people tune out. Despite all of that, you always find the perfect response for the mood. That is truly Kyon!"

I doubt anything there resembles a compliment.

"Well, you are a good guy after all."

Just as expected from the military level LANDSAT intelligence of Tsuruya-san. Please tell me more!

"Well, that's just how it is."

And just like that, the climax I was feeling burst like someone stuck a pin in a hot air balloon.

Tsuruya-san again began her cackles of laughter "But you never miss your step while going down your path. I have faith in you. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for Mikuru-chan. In this high school you live a life of fun events every day."

I highly doubt anyone could say that the events of the SOS Brigade would be considered normal.

"I wonder about that."

There was a light shining in both of Tsuruya-san's eyes. "If you don't think they're ordinary, who would? Haruhi would. So would Mikuru-chan. I'm sure Nagato-chi would think so. Koizumi-kun also would agree. Again, isn't this something you wished for?"

My immediate reply: not really. This event with our new member soured me.

"Nyahahahaha. So that's it."

As like someone had stepped a pawn in shoji Tsuruya-san took off ahead of me and looked back. "At the end of the month there'll be a flower viewing convention. Remember that! We're planning a lot of events there, so if you don't come it'll just be wasted.

And then finally she added, "I'll take care of that strange toy at my house. Don't be late asking for it! Later!"

With her casual tone and a wink, my senior took off up the hill. With her strong spirit, she'd be able to play though anything life brings to her. That's just our impressive Tsuruya-san. Since she's one year ahead of me, I'll never be able to match her. But for some reason that inferiority warms my heart when I think about it.

As Tsuruya-san's figure grew shorter and shorter, another slap to my back occurred. I turned around and by strange coincidence it was my classmates Kunikida and Taniguchi.

"Yo!"

I see that Taniguchi has regained that stupid-looking face after what Kuyou Suou did to him. After that incidental meeting he was going around depressed when I last looked. Thankfully ladies' man Taniguchi has fully revived.

"Yo, Kyon, you've got to introduce me to that girl you were with."

His idiocy has come to life.

"I heard about her from Kunikida. Sasaki-san and you have a good blood-type mix, don’t cha? And because of that, listen to me. You should stop hanging around Suzumiya now and then use your resourcefulness to go after some other girls now. Right? Right?"

All right. That's plenty Taniguchi. You can go after what you wish for. After all, it's the one thing you're spend thinking about since the beginning of time. But you're not quite suited for Sasaki. After all, you were rejected by Kuyou. Did she write her rejection on your forehead?

Taniguchi made some dramatic gestures in disapproval. "What? Any man would've been doomed around that girl. She's just like that you know. One day I'll meet a first-class beautiful idol group and then introduce them to you Kyon. Then you'll remember those words in anguish."

Right, I'll cry as much as I can. But will they be tears of laughter or sorrow?

"You say that now Kyon, but on graduation day you'll look back at the three years you've spent babysitting Suzumiya and wonder what in the world happened. We'll see then who's been living everyday like it was their last. By then it'll be too late to reflect in sorrow over what's been done."

Thanks for your warning. I'll be sure to take care. But I'm currently enjoying the prime of my high school days. You can live however you wish, but I hope you don't encounter any more aliens. They've really been nothing but trouble for me.

As if he couldn't stand the idiocy coming from Taniguchi, Kunikida cut in. You could see his thoughts easily on his face.

"Excuse me for cutting in like this. Kyon, people can be varied in their characteristics. There's plenty of similar and different people in regards to me. Just look at nature. In magnetic fields there's always North poles and South poles; in electricity there's positive and negative."

As we've come together and start walking the atmosphere thickens. It feels as though we're preparing for a physics lesson.

"Well, from here on it'll be somewhat of a physics lesson. Let's look at atoms, molecules, and even smaller microbes. The electromagnetic power between them is well known. With the exception of hydrogen, there are a multitude of protons and neutrons inside the nucleus of an atom. Since we know that neutrons don't have a charge, the electrical power in a nucleus is only between proton and proton. But protons repel each other. I wonder why protons keep going away from each other without making friends inside the nucleus."

Smart guy.

"I think Hideki Yukawa would understand. He was the first Japanese person to win the Nobel Prize. His theory was that a tiny molecule was binding together protons in the nucleus. He hypothesized that the particles that were interacting with the protons in that space couldn't be contesting with magnetic or gravitational forces but by means of a strong absorption force. In future years that theory was proven true. Thanks to those future studies Dr. Yukawa won the Nobel prize due to quarks and hadrons being proven possible to be excavated from an atomic nucleus.

That was a nice biography of Dr. Yukawa, but how does that relate to the events around us?

"Kyon, as I see it Suzumiya-san and yourself resemble each other. It's like you have the same + symbol. By all rights, I would instantly assume that you two would repel each other away and that would be the downfall of your relationship. I still agree with that impression today; I just can't shake it off. That's how things go in nature. But for some reason Suzumiya-san and yourself came together and can't be separated. As Dr. Yukawa proposed, there must be some atomic force that unites the two of you together. Some type of power like flicking off protons doesn't seem likely to me. But of course we've only found four types of powers in this world and no more since then. Strong, Weak, Electromagnetic, and Gravity. Is there another type of power that we've not discovered?"

Umm, what you said.

"But I don't know of such a thing. Perhaps it's a new power we can term the 'fifth element.' Ah, that would be a scientific dream though. You could think about human relations, well more specifically the relations between Kyon and Suzumiya-san, as well as other people's existence in that realm for a while. What parts do Koizumi-kun, Asahina-san, and Nagato-san play in there…well that would be irresponsible for me to ponder about. I have a feeling the SOS Brigade is structured like a nucleus. A giant structure that wants to sticks together even when separated. The separate portions come together to unite for one common goal. If that stability is destroyed, then each member will unite to bring down the culprit. I don't think a person exists in the world who could do that though. The only person I could think who could come close would be Tsuruya-san, though I don't think she'd choose that option."

Even I've noticed that much.

"Really, Tsuruya-san is such a smart person. In fact if I had to pick a reason why I came to North High, it'd be because she had come here."

Kunikida looked sideways at Taniguchi, who was eyeing the new freshman girls. He spoke in a whisper. "Don't tell Taniguchi this but as far as I know, Tsuruya-san is a genius. I just wanted to be close to her, but thanks to you and Suzumiya-san I've been able to actually get to know her. Thank you so much Kyon. Without knowing the extent of her abilities, I wouldn't have been able to get as far as I have. I've been in a little slump though. When you know a person who's on her level, you know that you're not close to where that person is. That's something I've been able to realize lately."

Someone like you who's able to understand all that you do would be considered a genius as well.

"Not really. Such a genius level is far away from me. The closest that I'd be able to achieve would be considered a prodigy but even then it would be a struggle for me to reach that height. To get to where she is now would take an immense amount of strength and will that I'm not certain I have. I've been thinking about giving up that dream. How long would it take me to

reach where she is now? Then at that time, she would be at a much higher spot and I'd have to aim for that place. It's like Achilles and the turtle. So I feel very comfortable where I am now right now. Previously I was advancing very fast, but now I feel as though I've stagnated where I'm at. I can't keep going to overtake her, but when I think about it, that's the only thing that gets me excited. Do you think that way of thinking is strange?"

Of course it's not strange! That ambition is absolutely wonderful! Since you've started talking about this, I've been able to see you in a new light. Thinking about something close to you but not fully understanding it's what drives you is what many people go through.

If we set Koizumi as the norm and disregard that normal level, then Tsuruya-san is not only one of the top people in North High, but she's probably one of the top in the world. Shouldn't it be a good thing that you're continuing to challenge her? Tsuruya-san is Tsuruya-san; a person who would it would probably be useless to try to cut her head open. I have a hunch I'd be given the younger brother or nephew treatment from her even in my best year.

And so we reached the classroom. Haruhi was already in her seat and glared at me as we walked in.

"We'll be operating as normal today. Immediately head to the clubroom after school."

I set my bag on the side of my desk.

"Hey, Haruhi."

"What?"

"Why did you come to North High?"

It was an abrupt question to her. Haruhi looked at me like she was a crocodile eyeing a bunch of water buffalo who had come to an oasis. Then she said. "Nothing in particular. I could've gone to a private school, but I came to this school in search of an interesting club."

Yes?

"Don't give me that stupid look. Well, that's why I came here. Unfortunately since there were none I guess my intuition can't be trusted, right?"

Well not really. After all, since you made such an interesting club shouldn't that be true after all? Since the club activities have started, you've made and sent out signs like an organization (be it a cheap one) and have had many events in the clubroom. Isn't that something?

"Yeah yeah. But I wasn't talking about our club activities, I was hoping there'd be some type of secret organization that was forming in the shadows at this school. But there's not one at

all. Well, it is secret after all. It has to be like it is in hiragana. It can't be in characters, otherwise it's not-a-secret."

Looking at her face while that childish pronunciation came from Haruhi's lips, I nodded. But your wish did come true Haruhi. There is indeed a secret organization located in this school but it's unlikely you'll ever know about it. Something that would make time travelers or extraterrestrials shake down to their atoms if they knew about it.

Haruhi glared at me like I was a child. Before long she put her head down and became limp on the desk. For some reason I composed a poem.

"At this occasion,

clasped with streamers around us,

we offer to these mountains

these fine autumn clothes

for we are at the gods' mercy.

Whatever the meaning, it's shouldn't be understood as a spring song.

And so we move to that afternoon.

"Anyone there?" I opened the door to the clubroom leaving behind Haruhi, whose turn it was for cleaning. There were three people there: Asahina-san, who was already in her maid costume, Nagato, who had returned to the clubroom, and Koizumi, who thought he was at home leaning over a board of Chinese Checkers.

Nagato raised her head to look at me. Koizumi greeted me with a gaze. But the strangest thing was Asahina-san at the window.

"Ah…"

She sighed as she changed the water for the flower Yasumi had brought. "She was suuuuuuch a cute person too. It's sad. I was going to let her call me "senpai" too."

So she said. Well since I call her "Asahina-san", there's no need to address her as "Asahina-senpai." Since she looks younger than I am, it's difficult to treat her as she's older than I am. But it's good like it is now. Asahina-san is Asahina-san. Besides, I don't know how old she really is.

"So she was in middle school huh…She did give off the vibe of a younger sister." For the time being, Asahina-san was acting in accordance with how Haruhi explained it. "I wanted to talk more with her."

I suddenly thought of something as I gazed the scene of the upperclassman wearing a maid outfit staring outside the window as her eyes watered.

This Asahina-san right now in the present will eventually one day be promoted into the adult version of herself somehow. Asahina-san (small) can't tell me anything now that would be helpful. Whenever Asahina-san (big) or Fujiwara comes around, that's when I find out everything. And that's only if the future is potentially affected. At least this Asahina-san will act differently when she becomes Asahina-san(big) right?

So when Asahina-san (big) visits next, she'll likely put me to work again.

"This fell in the clubroom."

The item that was presented to me was a barrette type hair ornament that I should easily remember. There's no need to look at all the details as it had Yasumi's smile mark on it. Was it intentionally placed here or is it an ordinary lost item?

Asahina-san stroked the orchid petal Yasumi left behind. "We won't be able to meet again. Next year, I'll…"

The senior Asahina-san will graduate in a year. She won't be here after that then. Unless there's a time-traveler related incident, has she only got one year left? Was there a reason that Asahina-san wasn't placed in the same grade, instead being one year ahead of us?

These kind of things I know about. Nothing particularly important though. I just know that future things and time travelers were to be considered decent overall, excepting one bastard. As a person in this time period, the past as well as the future are unrelated to me in the present. I'm like I am now, but who knows what I'll be doing ten or twenty years from now. Just tell me about the future if there's something important to do.

But I think I'll probably change a lot. The me in that time period, though there are things that I should do to better myself, probably won't do anything. As for the right thing to do, I'll have to let the future me decide on that. Isn't that how human life goes? Besides, I'm only a normal high schooler now, right?

While I was pondering what the future would bring for myself, I started to droop my eyes as sleep came along.

"So-rr-y for being late!" Haruhi came into the room with her usual smiling face that always gives me a bad premonition. What ideas came into her head while she was sweeping, I can't even guess. That smile would turn you away with the intensity and brightness of a midsummer sunflower.

I was preparing myself for her to ignore me while she walked to the brigade leader's chair, but Haruhi stopped like a pawn and looked into my hand.

"What's that?"

Quickly taking a look at it, Haruhi grabbed it out of my hand. "Ah, that. I used to wear something like this. I remember it had to be in elementary school though. I lost it when I went into middle school. But did she wear this too?"

Then those would be strong feelings she felt. I would hold things in my hands as well when I recalled things like that.

Her retreating figure was suddenly overlapped with a hallucination of the future Haruhi in my eyes. At that time, who was Haruhi calling out to? She turned around, but after that I don't know if it was towards me or some third party. If so, I imagine they're having a lot of fun with us.

If it was me, I probably would appear to be astonished at what was going on. That would certainly not be beneficial. But the future isn't certain. I haven't forgotten the weird things that Fujiwara and Asahina-san (big) talked about. While I don't understand how the split worlds apparently changed history, I do know that the future has the potential to be changed.

If only for a moment, I was able to see the future me. I remember that image. Now, I want to head towards that future. But to do that, there are various things that have to happen. I'll have to use Haruhi's tutoring services. After all, there's still two years left in high school. During that time I don't think Nagato, Asakura, or Kimidori's boss nor Kuyou or the Sky Canopy Domain universe sects will be leaving. Perhaps we won't be limited as a mid-boss confrontation with Tachibana and the strange pseudo-organization might happen before we encounter the final boss.

Well, I'm sure something will happen.

I know now that happiness isn't found by myself. It's with Nagato, Koizumi and my Asahina-san as well. It's with the idiotic Taniguchi, the frightfully calm Kunikida, and the flawless beauty Tsuruya-san. Thanks to always running around like the key for a lock, I've gathered quite a few acquaintances. I can't forget Sasaki too. Though she said goodbye, I don't think that's it. Even if it was a somewhat sentimental parting, she won't trick me with her words. Again, they're all related due to me and my spirit that affected them.

But now there's things that have yet to happen since they're in the future. I know that, from where I am now, I can't miss these things happening. Things like the SOS Brigade formation first anniversary or our Brigade Leader's surprise plan. I can't panic about the events that'll occur weeks from now. Looking ahead, there's Tsuruya-san's flower gathering convention ahead that we'll likely attend. I'm not sure if Haruhi's given up on recruiting a new member or not, but we'll know in about a month.

But with our five people, we could do anything.

No matter who our opponent is.

But that's no big deal.

There's another huge problem pressing on my mind. That would be what to get the brigade leader as a present. Or rather what I got her. So far nothing at all has come to my mind, but I'm not worried. If need be, I'll just ask the opinion of an expert.

And as I end my long, drawn out monologue, Haruhi placed the hair ornament in the brigade leader's desk and promptly went to the whiteboard. While she picked up the pen and was writing, silence filled the room. After she had finished writing, I could feel her triumphant smile glaring into the back of my retinas.

"Please read it Kyon."

Well, it is one of her orders after all. I quickly read, "Second Annual New School Year SOS Brigade Meeting…Hey! This is the first time I've heard about a meeting for today!"

"I had already told everyone and they didn't have any problems with holding one. Didn't I tell you too? Ah, sorry I forgot. Well, you're here now so it's alright."

I began to feel as though a bad bug had crawled onto my face as I was on stage. Perhaps it was near the back of my mouth. I clamped down and thankfully didn't taste any juice that would come from such a bug. I was rescued from eating such a rotten thing.

"So when is this meeting going to begin?"

Haruhi backhanded the corkboard and said, "As usual Tsuruya-san has invited us to go to her flower viewing part. It won't be an ordinary all-you-can-eat lunch though. I won't allow anything but the best SOS Brigade service plan. Therefore Kyon, Koizumi-kun, Mikuru-chan, Yuki…"

Koizumi had his broad grin, Yuki had her usual expressionless look, and Asahina-san had covered her mouth with her hands, but all three were looking at me.

"All of you will perform a side show! Something spectacular that will receive a thunderous amount of applause from everyone there."

Hey, wait! Isn't this supposed to be a huge flower viewing convention at the Tsuruya house? Don't you think some local celebrities or higher-ups would be there in attendance?"

"But doesn't that raise the quality of the spectators? Laughter is a worldwide trait. What type of art would the politicians and executives like? After all, laughing is the one thing that will remove your worries, regardless of gender, age, race, or nationality. Yes, art is how it should be!"

Please stop raising the tension around here and tell me where in the new word portion of the thesaurus you joke is. I highly doubt it's in Britannica. Sigh, you're already making cracks in my glass heart.

"Very well, side show it is! No, it has to be the main event! A big project designed to bring peace to everyone via new entertainment produced by the SOS Brigade that'll send everyone laughing so hard they'll convulse!"

Haruhi stated that as if her smile would compress the entire cluster of the Taurus constellation. Then after pausing as if she was drinking some water from the Red Sea, she loudly declared,

"Because we have such high expectations we have to prepare our show ahead of time. Let's start now!"

Postscript

It is I, Nagaru Tanigawa, who has been a bother.

Having filled the extremely big gap since the last novel, I'd like to start with an apology.

This story is a direct sequel to *Dissociation*, but there aren't enough words in the Japanese language to apologize for how late this got here or how long it took. I'd like to give a giant shout of thanks to all of those involved in the production process, especially the illustrator Noizi Itou and all of the people involved in the Literature department. I'm sorry I've been such a bother to you all.

Thank you all very very much.

And from that, for all the readers who have waited a long time for this work without deserting, I've sent ten billion apologies and a hundred billion thanks via the maximum intracerebral electrical output I can produce in all directions. I hope that it brings you some good luck when it arrives.

Haruhi is also kneeling in apology for this author's shortcomings as if she is hoping for forgiveness after receiving a body blow.

So this work, *The Surprise of Haruhi Suzumiya (First/Final Parts)* is an exact continuation from the previous work, *Dissociation*. For those of you who read *Dissociation* a while ago and have forgotten things, I'm sorry. Surely re-reading the story you will be a little happier when it's put together. Ah, I didn't want to make this troublesome for everyone who's received this, but it seems like I've gotten overwhelmed with tears. It's not so much due to obligations that I'm writing; it's that I've gotten the privilege to write this down.

Well then as for why this work has been delayed for so long, there's not really a reason for that. I'm somewhat embarrassed to confess there's not one. There's really no significance or any particular reason I wasn't able to write. Honestly, everyday life also became a hindrance as well. I yearned for a real cause so that I might have been able to claim a few reasons. I had difficulties explaining It to others so that they would understand because it was a personal issue. I'd say it was a Herculean task.

Again, I can't give an excuse. For example, my favorite computer kept putting up blue screens while I was in the middle of writing and it disheartened me or I kept wicked nightmares and would wake up without any sort of desire to continue writing or lastly I wasn't affected by the switch from analog to digital television as I kept watching it were all excuses that I couldn't say. Humans really have an abundance of reasons for excuses you know. Maybe some more interesting excuses will become joking matters. My guess would be that for most of my life my

personality trait that I'd been carrying around in a bag would be "laziness." I'd progress until I'd casually met my limit. That would probably be the cause of the delay.

Looking back into the half of my life I've lived, I've had a history of never being praised or doing anything spectacular. The only thing I can remember is a memory of failing over in agony like an idiot. I admire those who can continue to run forward into a concrete wall and shatter their heads into little pieces. I don't have that courage in me.

I apologize for polluting your ears while you listen to me reminisce from here. Dating back several years from now I debuted as a novelist. The exact month that I debuted is a bit fuzzy, but I think it was around June 10th, 2003. At that time I'm sure I was an incomprehensible bother to the staff at the Kadokawa *Sneaker Bunko* and *Dengeki Bunko* editorial staff. Even now I fret over whether I forgot something or not. Now as I suddenly remember, I succumb to a desire to run into a concrete wall.

Thanks to all of their support, most of my novels were improved from their weak beginnings. By the time *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* and *Let's Leave the School* ① became famous, I had already fallen into the current situation. But how it is right now is enjoyable.

Immediately following *The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumiya*, I had such a rush of ideas that were quickly written. With this break, it may have appeared to be that I had stopped writing. It was as if this me had reached his capacity and was barely grinding anything through. I was worried that people wouldn't understand everything. I like to think this stance wasn't mistaken.

Speaking of *Disappearance*, the theatrical animation version is something people should see. I was able to take place in the process of making the film with all the partners. I'm sure I was a bother to everyone, especially the people who work hard at making words into images at Kyoto Animation whom I owe a great deal of gratitude towards because they reduced the amount of weight on my end. Words of thanks can't feel hap hearted for what I feel towards them after they made *Melancholy* into an anime several years ago. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. There is nobody else that makes images like they can. So adds to the mountain of apologizes I've made.

And so I'm pushing my pencil around aimlessly now. To all the readers, I hope you enjoy this book and that it brings you lots of happiness.

I think I may write a somewhat strange thing and character from here on. I hope to continue receiving your support. I think the character will have a damaged personality. Now I think I'll finish the post-script.

Well then someday, somewhere, and somewhen I hope we'll be able to meet again.

See you again!

Project Staff

Chapter 7

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Chapter 8, Chapter 9

Translation: Ultimatemegax

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Final Chapter

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Epilogue, Postscript

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